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STAN LEE PRESENTS THE INCREDIBLE HULK

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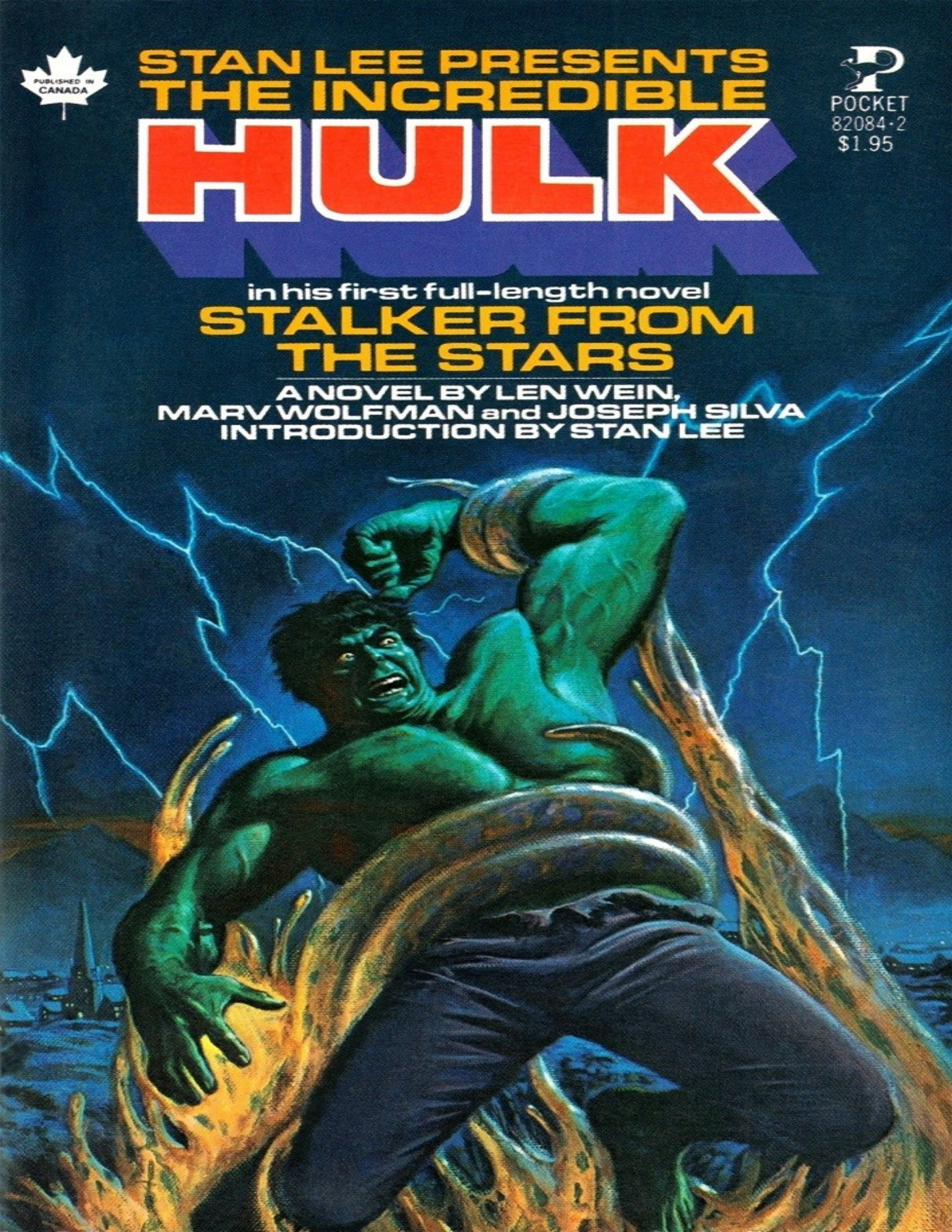
in his first full-length novel

STALKER FROM THE STARS

A NOVEL BY LEN WEIN,
MARV WOLFMAN and JOSEPH SILVA
INTRODUCTION BY STAN LEE



THE INCREDIBLE HULK
STALKER FROM THE STARS

FAR OUT! Who's this creature Sh'mballah who controls the minds and lives of the people in Crater Falls, North Dakota?

SHOCKING! He's not a who—he's a what. He's a tentacle-waving, electrified weirdo exiled from his own planet.

BRUTAL! The Hulk thinks Sh'mballah is cruising for a bruising. But can the green goliath marvelman beat the interplanetary baddie?

COLOSSAL! General Ross of the Army is doubtful. The Hulk's faithful sidekick is doubtful. But the Incredible Hulk is sure—he won't let Sh'mballah control him. No matter what ol' fettuccine-feelers thinks!

AN INSTANT COLLECTOR'S ITEM: THE HULK'S FIRST FULL-LENGTH NOVEL!

IT’S THE HULK!!!—
IT’S SH’MBALLAH!!!—
IT’S A DEADLY DUEL
TO THE DIABOLICAL DEATH!

“Ugly!”

The creature’s outer skin was tough and crusted, yet you could see inside, catching glimpses of bloated ribbons of thick purplish entrails. Inside the head an enormous pink brain floated, and there were several eyes, all bulging and yellow, clustered above a jagged mouth hole which was packed with a multitude of spiked teeth.

“I am Sh’mballah, Emerald One—and you are doomed!”

The Hulk planted his green fists on his hips and laughed derisively. “Bah! Hulk is not afraid of big jelly fish!”

Then Sh’mballah did his number and the Hulk was in trouble. Said Sh’mballah:

“I will own you! You will die!”

STALKER FROM THE STARS

by

LEN WEIN
MARV WOLFMAN
JOSEPH SILVA

A KANGAROO BOOK
PUBLISHED BY POCKET BOOKS NEW YORK

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This one’s for PAUL—
for hitting us in
the face with a fish.

Introduction

We always knew it! We always knew The Incredible Hulk was one of the most popular of *Marvel Comics'* awesome array of comic book stars. But even we were surprised to see our jolly green giant's television debut catapult him to the very top rank of the highest-rated shows of all.

Therefore, having proven his popularity in magazines, television, toys, games, and countless novelty items, what could be more natural than for our rascally rampager to do his super-powered thing in the pages of a *Pocket Books* novel? And, what a novel it is!

Written so it moves at breakneck speed by Len Wein and Marv Wolfman, *Stalker from the Stars* goes even a step further than the television show itself. Whereas the Universal Studios' version has omitted both the characters of Rick Jones and General "Thunderbolt" Ross, Len and Marv take us back to the original magazine concept, wherein the teen-aged Rick Jones, who owes his life to Dr. Bruce Banner, is the only living being to share our hero's awesome secret; and the irascible tough-as-nails "Thunderbolt" Ross has pledged himself to use all the military resources at his command to put an end to the menace of The Incredible Hulk!

But there's even more! Not only will you meet again two of our series' more colorful characters, but with the launching of this first in a possibly endless series of Hulk novelizations, you'll also return to the type of plot which originally made ol' Green-Skin one of the most popular superhero stars of all. *Marvel Comics* has always been famous for its inimitable blend of fantasy and realism—a mixture which gratifies the reader's sense of wonder while

couching the most outlandish-seeming situation in a blanket of believability. And *Stalker from the Stars* is no exception.

In this mile-a-minute hair-raiser, the planet Earth faces one of its greatest supernatural challenges—a challenge which the gargantuan Hulk can barely comprehend, and yet, a challenge which he alone has the power to meet and overcome! It’s bigger than life, daring in concept, and dazzling in execution.

So, if you, like me, still thrill to a well-told tale of fantasy, mounted in mystery, garnished with action, and swathed in suspense, I congratulate you! You’ve come to the right place.

Now, let’s take our leave of the workaday world, which is too much with us, as we once again join the most powerful living creature on the face of the earth in his battle to save mankind from a menace from outer space—a menace which transports us back to the days when men dared to dream of dazzling dramas that boggled the mind and stunned the senses! Let’s lose ourselves in the land of high adventure, with only the Hulk to guide us! I’ve a hunch you’ll enjoy the trip!

Excelsior!

Stan Lee
New York City, 1978

Prologue

He awoke to find himself in darkness, a cold, oppressive darkness, stinking of damp and decay. He could not remember at first how he had come to be here or how long he had slept, but his body ached with the stiffness of untold years of immobility. He attempted to move, but found he could not. The darkness held him fast like some smothering shroud.

For a moment, panic threatened to overwhelm him, but cautiously he forced the feeling down. He had survived so much else; he would survive this, as well. With a concentrated effort of will, he gained control of himself, calmed himself. When his spirit was finally at peace, he sent his senses questing, seeking to determine the manner of his imprisonment, and thus, some means of escaping it.

At first, he could sense nothing, merely the darkness and more darkness beyond it, but then—

Then he began to sense—

Others!

There were others. He could feel them now, out beyond the darkness, could hear them buzzing at one another urgently. He was not alone. Freeing himself of the burden of elation, he called out to them.

No response.

He called again, louder now, more desperate. And this time he knew he had been heard. First one, then another, then many more of those beyond the darkness responded unhesitantly to his call. Soon, he would be free once more. Soon, everything would be as it once had been.

All he need do now was wait.

One

A pleasant little town, bright in the afternoon sun. Newly green trees lining the main street, stripes of cool shadow cutting across the clean sidewalks and close-cropped lawns. A small town square, dotted with oak trees. A white town hall facing it.

He didn’t realize how close he was to Hell, or at least a reasonable facsimile thereof.

Sweaty and smeared with road dust, he had come tromping into the pleasant little town of Crater Falls in the middle of a hot spring afternoon. He was a lean young man a few months from twenty. His dark hair was worn moderately long; a faded knapsack and a battered guitar case made a sizable hump on his back.

There was a huge soldier, made of greenish metal, standing in the center of the town square, commemorating some long-ago war. Rick Jones, shifting the weight of his gear, bent and drank from the fountain the tarnished soldier guarded.

He’d been walking north ever since Aberdeen, hadn’t had much luck in thumbing rides. Maybe around here he looked a shade too freakish, like the advance scout for some unwanted invasion of nomadic hippies.

Rick grinned, something he hadn’t done much lately, and glanced around the tiny park. All the accepted props were there, birds in the trees, old men on the swayback benches, a lazy dog sprawled in a patch of shade.

A pleasant little town.

Nothing showing to warn Rick he ought to turn around and get the hell out of there. Fast.

This wasn’t his kind of town, not a place he’d want to settle down in. No, he’d never end up decorating one of those faded green benches.

Of course, he might never get to be an old man.

This pilgrimage of his, this quest which possessed him, would probably kill him someday.

“Don’t feel so damned guilty,” he warned himself. “He’s told you not to . . . but, then, what else would he say? It’s the kind of guy he is . . . except when . . .”

Rick held his hands under the spouting water, washed them longer than necessary, and then wiped them on the sides of his worn jeans.

“Quit the soul-searching,” he advised himself. “Get on with business.”

Rick had a reason for being here in this quiet little town. There was a man he had to see, a man who might be able to help Bruce Banner.

If Bruce could be helped, if he could be cured, then this odyssey of Rick’s could end.

Yeah, and so could Bruce’s. He’d stop running, stop hiding, stop hating himself.

Adjusting his burden into a slightly more comfortable position, Rick started out across the square.

He wondered what he'd do if he did succeed. He had a few friends scattered around the country. But since the band had broken up, there weren't that many people he was close to. Rick had been an orphan for nearly as long as his memory stretched back, so there wasn't any family waiting for him anyplace—no candle burning in any window, no one hoping for their wandering boy to return.

At the grassy edge of the little park, a chunky old man wearing parts of two different suits was talking to some squirrels.

"This is all you're going to get today, you little nitwits," he was informing the three gray squirrels which stood on their hind legs near his bench. "Couldn't afford no nuts." Noticing Rick's approach, he asked him, "If you was a squirrel, wouldn't you eat pizza?"

"With or without anchovies?" Rick said as he slowed, then stopped.

"Is anchovies these squiggly things here?" The old man had a grease-splotched brown bag on his knee, a wedge of cold, old pizza in one plump hand. "I bummed this off of Buscema's Café. Figure I got to go easy on my nut-buying until my next check shows up. You're a stranger."

"Here, yeah," Rick admitted. "Maybe you can help me. I'm looking for Tinker Street."

"Used to play the mandolin when I was your age," the old man said, noticing the guitar case. "Young people don't seem to play the mandolin anymore. Tinker Street?"

Rick nodded. "I'm looking for Dr. Stern's house."

The old man straightened up, putting the pizza aside. "Doc Stern? Why?"

After running his tongue over his lips, Rick said, "He's a friend of mine, sort of, and he told me I might be able to get

a job in Crater Falls.”

Shaking his white-topped head, the old man said, “Ain’t likely. Most young people go away from here. You’re a novelty.”

“Suppose so.”

“Some folks in Crater Falls think Doc Stern is . . .” He didn’t finish the sentence.

“Think Doc Stern is what?” Rick prompted.

After clearing his throat, the old man said, “Sometimes I get the feeling that this town ain’t what it appears to be at all. Could be I’m just getting goofy in my old age.”

Rick leaned toward him. “What does all that have to do with Dr. Stern?”

With a shrug, the old man said, “Nothing, nothing, probably. Go along Main Street here for three blocks and you’ll see Tinker Street. You want to go left and the doc’s place is 232.” He returned his attention to coaxing the squirrels into eating pizza.

“Thanks.” Rick moved on.

Was the town anything more than it appeared? Anything more than a dull monument to Middle America? Rick was going to find out very soon.

The shingle house was covered with vines. They swirled up over its weathered brown front, their deep green leaves tangling and intermingling. The stone path cutting across the dry, brittle lawn to the front veranda was cracked and dotted with weeds.

“He ain’t to home.”

Rick gave a start, and his foot hit the top porch step harder than he’d intended. “Dr. Stern, you mean?” he managed to ask after a few seconds.

Coming toward the doctor's neglected house and grounds, the young man hadn't noticed that someone was sitting on the old porch swing, nearly hidden by shadow.

"That's who I mean. Who are you?"

"Friend of his."

It was a woman there on the swing, gaunt and immobile, arms stick-thin, hands folded on her narrow lap. "Name of?"

"I'm Rick Jones," he replied. "I've come a long way to visit Dr. Stern. Do you know when he'll be—"

"Never know with him," the frail woman said. "He's here sometimes for days on end, in that smelly lab of his. Next thing you know, he's off—traipsing in the woods, exploring up into the hills beyond the Crater. You just never know."

"And you are?"

"Alma Snell."

Nodding, Rick asked, "A friend of his?"

"Not especially. I'm his housekeeper, part-time. Couldn't be more than part-time, since I got a family of my own to look after, four children, and that's a full-time job right there." She tilted forward, letting a fragment of sunlight touch her pale face. "You come to help him?"

"Well, actually, I was hoping he'd help me."

"Always going off into the woods, poking around in them hills." She shook her head, causing the wooden swing to rattle. "Why's he do it?"

"Got me." Rick wiped at his perspiring forehead with the back of his hand. "He didn't mention when he'd be back? It's sort of important that I see him."

"Why?"

Might as well use the same lie twice. "He told me he might know of a job around here. I'm looking for work."

The woman made a clicking sound in her throat. "Probably over at Connelly's Boardinghouse. Yes, that's probably

where the job is.”

“Dr. Stern didn’t give me any details—said he’d fill me in when I got here.”

“Typical of the doctor—he’s spare with his information. Knows more than all of us in Crater Falls put together, but ain’t about to give anything away.”

“Maybe I’d better check with the boardinghouse.”

“Linda’s real thick with the doctor,” the woman said, settling back into the shadows. “Works for him part-time, secretarial. And she runs the boardinghouse, too, ever since her Aunt Maud passed away. I believe she’s been thinking about taking on somebody to do odd jobs, not that Linda Connelly confides in me.”

“Where will I find the boardinghouse?”

“It’s on Chestnut Street.” One thin hand drifted up off her lap, pointed at him. “You know what the smart thing to do would be?”

Rick shook his head. “Tell me.”

“Get out of town,” the woman advised. “Fast as you can.”

Two

Green thoughts.

As the train rattled through the hot, dry Midwestern afternoon, Bruce Banner’s mind drifted back into the past. He sat huddled in a dim corner of the swaying, clattering boxcar, his thin arms hugging his lean chest. In his mind he relived, endlessly, all that had happened to him—the events that led up to his becoming what he was.

The freight car whined around a curve. Loose straw on the smeared floor danced and crackled.

Banner had hopped the freight in Detroit yesterday, or maybe it was longer ago than that. Time didn’t much matter. His days were always filled with the same thing. Running. Trying to escape the continual pursuit. Fleeing also from himself.

An impossible thing, yet he was compelled to keep at it. Until he found some answer. Except Banner didn’t believe, when he was at all honest with himself, that there was an answer.

Despite the bumping, jolting ride, Banner dozed some. And his past life unwound once again . . .

. . . Glaring yellow desert, stretching away in every direction. So hot it shimmered and seemed unreal. Inside the huge bunker it was cold—the air had a crisp metallic feel. Everything was white and nearly spotless, the control panels gleamed, the observation portholes shone. Computers clicked, hummed, and droned, all with impeccable efficiency. The white-coated technicians moved soundlessly, going about their work with admirable concentration.

Banner stood in the midst of it all. He was Project Designer and Coordinator, the man in charge. He found himself sweating, perspiration beading on his narrow back. “It’s much too late for that, Igor,” he was saying.

“It’s too dangerous. You know that as well as I do,” said Igor Drenkov, a wide, rumbling man. His thick dark eyebrows tilted toward each other. “You should—”

“You still have time to leave the bunker, Igor, and get clear of the test area. If you’re really afraid of—”

“Oh, no, my friend. I stay.” Drenkov folded his arms across his massive chest. “In Russia, before I . . . slipped away to your country, I was the leading authority on gamma research.”

There was something about this defector, brilliant as he admittedly was, which rankled. But Banner had a reputation for rarely losing his temper. “I know that, Igor. It’s one reason why I allowed you to work on the Gamma Project.”

The Russian snorted. “Work? You’ve allowed me, my dear Dr. Banner, to be little more than a flunkie. You should have confided in me, shared the secrets of gamma-ray control. Isn’t that, after all, the scientific spirit which you in the United States do so much to encour—”

“We’re running late, Igor.” Taking a deep breath, the lean Banner turned away from his angered colleague. He frowned over the clipboard in his head, ticking off items on an intricate imaginary checklist. He started along a row of huddled technicians.

“You’ve devised a fissionable G-bomb,” said Drenkov, tailing him, “or so you claim. Why, then, won’t you—”

“If you’ll shut the hell up, Igor, you’ll see just what sort of bomb I’ve devised,” Banner told him, his voice rising now. “We’re here in this damned bunker to watch it be tested. Remember?” He glanced from a row of dials to his wristwatch.

Before the big Russian could reply, a red light began flashing across the chill room. Then a heavy metal door swung open.

“Now what’s wrong?” the bulky, gray-haired man who came stomping into the room wanted to know. “You better have a damned good reason for all this halfwit delay!” The abundant brass trim on his blue uniform glittered in the blinker’s artificial light.

“You can’t rush this sort of—”

“Rush, my aching fanny!” bellowed General Thaddeus “Thunderbolt” Ross. “Rushing is one thing, and then there’s stubborn foot-dragging.”

“Money,” murmured one of the slim lieutenants who moved in the blustering general’s wake.

“Right! Every damned second you dawdle, it costs the government big bucks. The halfwit taxpayers are always bellyaching about the military budget, and now—”

“Sometimes,” cut in Banner in a quiet, level voice, “I think I made a mistake leaving the solitude and peace of my own private lab to bring my ideas to the govern—”

“Aw, you talk like a man with a paper bummy, Banner!” stated Thunderbolt Ross. “My men have been stationed here

for days on end, wasting time because of your confounded delays. The bomb is supposed to be tested today. Right now! Hell, I have *guests* here to see the damned test."

Banner maintained control of himself. "You have to realize, General, that we're fooling with some very powerful forces here," he patiently explained to the angry military man. "I've got to be sure every precaution is taken."

"Don't you think I know we're monkeying with powerful forces, for cripe's sake!" Ross's beefy hands turned into fists. "Why in blue blazes do you think we dumped such a stewpot of money into your lap? We want to unleash these so-called powerful forces, we want a gamma bomb that'll scare the bejeepers out of every damned enemy of the U.S.A.!"

Banner turned his back, then began moving along the rows of control panels. "The test will take place in a few minutes, General. The more you yell, the more time it's going to take."

Waving a fist at the retreating scientist, Thunderbolt Ross said, "I'll tell you what your trouble is, Banner—you're chicken. Right, chicken! You come up with one of the great weapon ideas of our generation, and then you're afraid to follow through."

Drenkov, who'd been watching the exchange with a thin smile on his face, said, "You may have a point there, General."

"Oh, stuff it in your armpit, Drenkov!" said the general with a snort. "You're worse than he is, and I still think you're a spy for the Russians. If I had my way, I'd be in charge of this Gamma Project and all you halfwits would be locked up in—"

"General Ross," said Banner, striving to keep his temper under control, "it's time to commence the final countdown."

General Ross snorted. "About time!"

Drenkov eased over to Banner's side. "Are you certain all your calculations are correct? If you'd confide more in—"

"I don't make mistakes, Igor."

A black technician turned from his monitor screen. "Countdown has begun, Dr. Banner."

"Okay, Gabe." Banner moved to a reinforced observation panel in the bunker's thick wall. He wanted to witness the explosion as directly as possible. "Now we'll know for sure what happens when powerful gamma rays are released."

He lifted a pair of binoculars off a metal shelf and raised them to his eyes. The desert outside was filled with a dry yellow stillness—an expectant stillness, waiting for the explosion.

These were the final few minutes before all his theories would be tested. Everything he'd worked for these past years—all the time and effort was about to pay off. Or fail. Banner felt himself admiring the tranquility of the bright landscape outside, wishing he could find that kind of serenity for himself.

But you're going to destroy that serenity, he thought to himself. *In a very few moments the gamma bomb will explode out there and . . .*

Far to the right of his vision, a tiny swirl of dust was showing. Probably only the wind making a dust devil—except that there didn't seem to be any breeze outside.

Banner glanced at one of the room's many clocks. Less than three minutes to detonation time.

Jamming the binoculars back to his eyes, he stared out again at the desert. The dust cloud was coming nearer and at its center now he could make out a red dot. The dot grew, expanded, became a car—a car with someone at the wheel.

"Good Christ, there's somebody out there!" He spun, letting the glasses fall to the floor, and ran for the door.

Drenkov reached for his arm. “What are you doing, Banner?”

“Somebody’s driving into the test area!”

Thunderbolt Ross made a grab at him, too. “It’s too late now to stop the countdown!”

Banner’s slim body eluded both men. He went on toward the door, made it, and wrenched it open. He sprinted down the corridor to the outer door, ignoring the angry and surprised voices behind him.

The heat of the day slammed into him like a blow. It was almost as though he’d dived belly-down into a pool of water. Narrowing his eyes against the glare, he ran for the jeep General Ross and his party had arrived in.

The keys were dangling from the ignition. Banner leaped into the driver’s seat, started the motor, and was roaring away from the bunker in his own cloud of dust before anyone from the bunker had made it outside.

Banner could see the car clearly now as he aimed his borrowed Jeep at it. The vehicle had stopped near the protective trench.

“What kind of idiot would come blundering in here?”

He saw the driver now. Only a boy, a teen-ager. Feet up on the dashboard, a guitar over his knees.

The Jeep nearly banged into the ancient red car. Banner was out of it before the dust had settled. “For the love of God!” he shouted. “Get out of here! You’re in a danger zone!”

The young man peered out at him. “It’s okay, no sweat. See, I bet some of my buddies I could sneak past your guards and—”

“Idiot, a bomb is going to go off here in less than a minute!” Banner yanked the car door open, caught the young intruder by the collar, and pulled him out into the

daylight. The guitar came flying out, too, its strings whanging in protest.

“A bomb?” said Rick Jones. “Come on, you’re kidding. There aren’t any more—”

“Just shut the hell up and hope we can make it to that trench over there!” Banner dragged Rick, the guitar tangled between his legs for part of the dash, toward the deep, wide trench.

That slit in the yellow of the desert never seemed to get any closer. They ran, ran without stopping.

And finally they were at its edge. Banner tossed the boy in and went diving in after him.

An absolute silence came rolling across the desert. And then gradually it changed, becoming the loudest noise Banner had ever heard. The world shook as though it were ending; an intense greenness stabbed into his eyes. He opened his mouth, the way a drowning man does, to suck in just one more lungful of life.

Then the silence again. Blackness.

“. . . alive.”

“It’s a blasted miracle! By all rights there shouldn’t be anything left of him.”

Mostly new faces. Four or five of them floating in the haze above Banner. The only familiar one was that of Thunderbolt Ross, and even that one came in hazy and distorted.

Banner finally managed to say, “You . . . got me out of there . . .”

“You absorbed the full impact of that gamma bomb, Dr. Banner,” one of the faces told him, a concerned doctor’s face. “I don’t know exactly why you’re among the living at all.”

“That kid . . . that crazy, idiotic kid . . .”

“He’s alive and well, too. Later on, he wants to talk to you.”

The room was filling in some, the white walls and the watching doctors and nurses. And the impatient-looking General Ross.

“Damned fool thing to do,” muttered Ross. “Risk your fanny to save a civilian. Dumb.”

“Suppose it . . . maybe it was,” said Banner. He focused on the doctor who’d spoken to him before. “What . . . do you think . . . will happen to me now?”

Shaking his head, the doctor said, “We really don’t know. We’re going to have to wait and see.”

“Wait and see,” echoed Banner as he fell asleep again.

Three

They kept him behind thick glass.

They talked to him through overhead speakers, fed him on trays shoved through a slot in the wall of his room.

His cell.

Banner was fairly certain he was still someplace within the hospital, but in a very special kind of isolation. They were somewhat vague when he asked for details.

“Very odd fluctuations in your radiation levels,” one of the doctors had told him. “Frankly, we don’t quite understand what’s happening to you.”

After a while, he didn’t bother to talk to them. This was as close to solitude as he was likely to get for a good long time.

“How long?” he did ask once. “How long do I have to stay here?”

“We’re not certain, Dr. Banner,” replied the voice out of the box. “There has never, as you very well know, been a case exactly like yours.”

Then something unusual happened. Banner lost his temper.

“Damn it!” he shouted, shaking a fist at the thick glass wall. “I’m tired of being treated like some creature off ‘The Late Show’!” He ran, grabbed up his food tray, and sent it flying into the glass wall.

“Easy, now, Dr. Banner.”

He ignored them, regained control of himself, then sat in the corner of the room, huddling in on himself, sulking like an animal in its cage.

A few hours later it happened.

Drenkov had paid a visit. “You’re not looking particularly well, Banner,” came the Russian’s voice through the microphone, “even for you.”

Frowning, Banner watched his colleague standing smugly on the other side of the heavy glass. He made no effort to respond.

“I wanted you to know,” Drenkov continued, “you won’t have to confide in me about the Gamma Project. Since your little accident, I’ve risen in status.” The Russian paused, smiling. “I am quite confident my request for complete access to your confidential files will be honored. Then there’ll be absolutely no need for—”

“You damned—!” Banner charged the glass wall, hit at it with his small fists.

Drenkov’s pleased laughter came through the speaker and he was gone.

“He can’t do that!” Banner cried. “I won’t have him prying into my . . . my . . .”

Suddenly, Banner’s raging anger overwhelmed him. His skin tingled. The world abruptly grew dark before his eyes. He threw his hands to his face, then saw them glowing a faint green—a green which began to darken, and grow deeper, even as the hands themselves began to enlarge.

Banner clenched his fists in agony, and he heard a faint ripping sound as the seams of his shirt split wide open, giving way before a sudden swell of steel-hard muscle running rampant over his entire body.

No longer was Bruce Banner a frail, slender scientist. In his place stood an awesome figure, fully seven feet tall, clad in the tatters of Banner's clothing. A brutish figure rippling with strength and sinew, but whose narrowed eyes displayed little intelligence from beneath a hooded brow.

Snarling in bestial rage, the behemoth raised an immense fist and dealt the glass of his prison a tremendous blow. The glass exploded, shattering into huge jagged chunks. Alarm bells rang, alarmed voices began shouting, and widened eyes watched as the brutish creature lumbered out through a gaping hole in the building wall, then strode away into the darkness.

"What *was* that?" asked one of the witnesses.

"I don't know," replied another. "Nothing human. More like some kind of . . . a *Hulk!"*

. . . And that had been *how* long ago?

Banner wasn't exactly sure. A short time, a long time, it didn't really matter anymore.

Banner soon learned that, once his anger passed, he would become himself once more.

His affliction was like some sort of disease, causing uncontrollable fits. And it terrified Banner more than anyone else. He was only human, after all. From time to time, despite his greatest efforts, he was bound to lose his temper. And when he did, he would change, becoming something less than human, yet more than beast. A wild, rampaging creature possessed of unparalleled strength. Seven feet tall, one thousand pounds of unfettered fury. The most powerful manlike creature ever to walk the earth.

The incredible Hulk!

If only, Banner thought, hunkered down in the rattling boxcar, *I could find some way to end . . .*

Then Banner heard it. Above the clacking of the train, there was a new sound growing.

A whupping, pocking noise in the hot sky above him. He didn’t need to go to the door to know what the whupping sound meant.

Helicopters. Choppers dipping low, following the onrushing train.

Once more his pursuers had found him.

Four

He shouldn’t have felt cold.

The sun was slanting down through the chestnut trees which lined the wide flagstone pathway. And the house itself was pleasant enough, a turn-of-the-century wooden structure with dormered windows and a turret from which a weathervane sprouted. Its several stained-glass windows glowed in the late-afternoon light. Very homey and well kept.

Yet Rick Jones felt a sudden chill as he made his way toward the porch of Linda Connelly’s boardinghouse. Rick didn’t exactly believe in premonitions, but he had a sudden and unsettling feeling that before he left this place some very rough things were going to happen to him.

There was a cat watching him. A frizzy orange thing just on the other side of the screen door. The cat made hungry, anticipating sounds.

“Got nothing to feed you, kitty. If you can get over to the park, though, there may be some pizza left.” He pressed the

doorbell.

Nothing happened, not even a ringing inside the quiet house.

Rick switched to knocking. “Anybody home?”

“Yes,” said a pleasant voice behind him. “I was over in the garage.”

Turning, Rick saw a very pretty young woman standing down on the path and smiling inquisitively up at him. She was probably two or three years older than he was. Still within his range. “Miss Connelly?”

“I’m Linda Connelly.” She had green eyes, and long auburn hair that was tied back with a single twist of emerald-colored ribbon. Even in jeans and a faded checked shirt, her slim figure showed to advantage. “Are you looking for a room?”

“Among other things.” Grinning, his guitar case banging into his knapsack, he trotted back down the steps to face the pretty girl. “Your doorbell, by the way, doesn’t work.”

“And the roof over the front parlor leaks,” said Linda. “Old Mr. Marschall is the only handyman in town. Even on the rare occasions when you can find him at home, it’s very difficult to acquire his services, because he’s also nearly deaf.”

“I’m handy,” volunteered Rick, “and I happen to be hunting for a job.”

“In this town?” She looked surprised. “Would you like a glass of lemonade?”

“Yeah, I would.”

“Let’s go in, then,” said the girl. “Don’t step on Toto, because she likes to wind herself around strangers in hopes of bumming an extra meal.”

“Toto isn’t a cat’s name.” He climbed the creaky wooden steps and held the screen door open.

“My aunt wouldn’t let me have a dog.” Smiling, she stepped across the threshold.

Sure enough, Toto slithered around Rick’s ankles as he followed Linda along the cool, shadowy hallway. It was difficult to dodge the cat and at the same time admire the way the girl carried herself. “I’m used to not being in the high wage bracket,” he said. “So what about the job?”

She took hold of the refrigerator handle. “You haven’t told me your name.”

“It’s Rick Jones. Am I hired?”

Laughing, she took a frosted pitcher out of the refrigerator. “This thing was my aunt’s—cut glass, and must weigh a good ten pounds. Was always spilling it when I was a kid.” After setting the hefty pitcher on the round, wooden kitchen table, the girl fetched glasses. “You’re bright and able-bodied, Rick. Why are you so anxious to get a job in Crater Falls?”

He took the proffered glass of lemonade. “Cheers,” he said, sipping. “Okay, I’ve got another reason for being in town, Miss Connelly. It’s very important that I see Dr. Stern.”

The girl, very carefully, pulled out a straight-backed chair and seated herself at the table. “You can call me Linda,” she said finally, eyes on the glass her fingers were circling.

“Okay, Linda,” he said, unslinging his guitar and backpack. “I know you’ve been working, part-time, anyway, with the doctor. His housekeeper told me.”

“Oh, her.”

“I really do need a place to stay and a temporary job. The most important thing is talking to Dr. Stern. Do you—”

“He’s not a regular doctor, you know, not an M.D.”

“No, Dr. Stern is one of the leading researchers in the field of gamma rays.” Rick took a chair opposite her. “He used to be with the government; quit to do research on his own. I’m interested in that research because I think Dr. Stern’s come

up with something which can maybe . . . well, it's hard to explain. Let's just say I hope he can help a friend of mine."

A frown touched Linda's face. "How do you mean help?"

He stroked a finger up and down his frosted glass. "My friend is . . . he has a rare sort of illness."

"All right, I won't pry any further." She rested her elbows on the table. "Thing is, Rick, I've been very worried about Dr. Stern lately. Now most of the people hereabouts don't care much for him. It isn't that he's indifferent, so much as that he's preoccupied thinking about his own work. Now and then when I've been working for him, he's shown real kindness to me."

After taking another sip of his lemonade, Rick said, "Why are you worried about him? Because some of the local folks don't care for him?"

Linda shook her head. "That's only a minor issue," she said. "I'm really bothered about what he's been up to these past few weeks. He's been spending more and more time away from home."

"The housekeeper told me he explores the woods and the hills around the crater quite a bit. Is that what you're talking about?"

"Yes, because lately he's looked very upset when he comes back from one of these excursions." She twisted a curl of auburn hair around a fingertip.

"He takes his scientific gear along with him? I mean, these aren't pleasure trips?"

"No, it has something to do with gamma radiation—that much I know," replied the girl. "When I try to find out what's troubling him, Dr. Stern usually tells me nothing at all."

Leaning toward her, Rick asked, "Do you have any idea where Dr. Stern is right at the moment?"

"He told me he was going to leave yesterday, quite early. He's out in the wilds somewhere."

“Has he ever given you any hint at all as to what’s bothering him?”

Linda frowned. “Once I heard him mutter something like, ‘It just can’t be possible.’ What that means, I’m not sure.”

“Can we expect him back soon?”

The girl hesitated. “He usually doesn’t stay away more than a day or two.”

Rick pushed back from the table. “Okay, I’d like a place to stay for a while,” he said, “plus a part-time job.”

“I can fix you up with both,” she said.

Five

The train thumped and screeched; the wooden walls of the freight car chattered.

Bruce Banner was thrown off balance as the boxcar groaned to a full stop out here in the middle of nowhere.

Voices started talking to him out of the sky.

“We know you’re in there, Banner!”

“You have one minute to surrender!”

And then what? Scowling, Banner picked himself up off the straw-littered floor. They wouldn’t kill him, wouldn’t hurt him seriously. They were obliged to capture him humanely, the same way you brought in a rare specimen for the zoo.

Five helicopters at least, judging from the loud chopping of the propellers, were dangling overhead and counting out the seconds.

“Let me alone!” Banner called out through cupped hands. “Go away!”

A lot of good that would do. They'd never leave him alone, never give him any peace as long as he lived.

He saw two of the choppers now, each floating about a hundred feet away, out there in the glaring afternoon.

"Your time is up, Banner!"

"You've forced us to use the somna-gas!"

They didn't really sound as though they regretted it. In fact, they seemed somewhat unhappy that they weren't allowed to do worse.

Chuff!

A projectile came whizzing out of one of the hovering copters. It smacked into the dry plain a few feet from the open door of Banner's boxcar, and a yellow gas came ribboning out.

"Why can't they stop hounding me?" he asked aloud.

He smashed the wall of the freight car with his fist.

Karash!

Wood splintered and gave way.

"Why won't puny humans go away?" he roared, smashing again at the wooden walls which surrounded him. "Why won't little men leave Hulk alone?"

Once again, the anger had triumphed. Against his will, as always, Bruce Banner had been transformed into the monstrous green Goliath called the Hulk.

The choppers were aware of the sudden change, and they whooshed away, putting a safe distance between themselves and the train.

"Hulk will teach you all a lesson!" With ease, he ripped away an immense section of the boxcar wall. Then, wielding the planking like a mighty bat, the Hulk leaped from the train. "Hulk will show you all!"

The dry earth crackled as his massive feet struck it. Before the nearest helicopter could climb out of danger, the

growling man-brute had swung his improvised weapon.

Smash! Karash!

The entire underside of the aircraft was destroyed with a single blow. Wobbling, struggling like a crippled insect, the chopper plummeted to earth, its crew just barely leaping to safety.

Snorting, the Hulk spun around. A second copter was risking a pass at him.

Chuff!

A gas canister exploded almost at his feet, and swirls of yellow smoke engulfed him.

“When will stupid humans learn? They can’t hurt Hulk! Nothing can hurt Hulk!”

He squatted, then leaped skyward. His huge and powerful emerald-green fingers grasped the copter’s landing gear.

“But Hulk can hurt you!”

Wrunch!

One of the jade giant’s massive fists tore clean through the cabin of the helicopter. The ship rocked back and forth in the bright afternoon, and then, like a pendulum which has suddenly lost its clock, it plunged earthward.

The Hulk let go, leaping clear before the second ship came crashing to the ground.

Snarling triumphantly, the green Goliath shook a fist at the trio of remaining military craft. “Hulk will get you next, little men! Hulk will smash you all!”

“Dr. Banner, nothing can be gained by this.”

“We ask you to surrender quietly before—”

“Bah! Do not talk of puny Banner! Hulk is not Banner! Hulk is Hulk! And Hulk will never surrender!”

The helicopters remained hovering a hundred feet above him, watching the green-skinned behemoth cautiously.

Grunting with satisfaction, the Hulk loped back to the tracks. Stooping, he grabbed a section of the metal railing. With a snarl on his emerald lips, he uprooted the track and snapped it in two over his broad knee, leaving himself with a length of track about six feet long.

Whirling, he hurled his makeshift spear directly at one of the remaining copters.

Kathrash!

It ripped up through the bubble cabin, narrowly missing the pilot.

Fists clenched in fury, the Hulk watched the stricken craft come struggling down to a jolting landing.

Then, turning his back on the two helicopters still remaining, the Hulk thoomed away across the afternoon plains, his incredibly powerful leg muscles carrying him miles with each awesome leap.

Wisely, the helicopters didn't follow. Instead, the men inside scurried down to tend to their fallen comrades, and they breathed a silent sigh of relief.

General Thunderbolt Ross's scowl intensified. "Well, it's a joy to see you again, Quartermain."

"Since you're not noted far and wide for being whimsical, General, I assume your greeting is sincere." Clay Quartermain had come strolling into the general's private Gamma Base office, unannounced and uninvited. He was a tall, handsome man with hair a few shades lighter than his maize-colored jumpsuit. "Let me add, old man, that I'm equally cheered at the sight of you."

"If you're going to be a so-called liaison between Gamma Base and SHIELD, Quartermain, you ought to stick around here during times of crisis."

"There's always a crisis around here." Casually, Quartermain settled into a wing chair and glanced around at

the blank, gray walls. “You ought to think about posting a few rock posters in this place, General.”

“I’ll show you something to capture your halfwit interest.” Ross snatched up a memo from his desktop and waved it at the Supreme Headquarters International Espionage Law-Enforcement Division agent.

“Too tough to read on the wing. I’ll wait until you cease fanning yourself with it.”

“Allow me to read it to you. It says: ‘Regret to report Hulk escaped. Three helicopters ruined, five men injured.’ ”

“Same old story,” observed Quartermain. “You ought to consider having those memos printed up in hundred lots. Be much cheaper.”

“You know what I don’t like?”

“Want the list alphabetically, or—”

“What I don’t like is smart alecks. If I had my way, you’d —”

“General, I’m as dedicated to the health and well-being of our democratic chunk of the world as you are,” he said, locking his hands behind his head. “However, I don’t believe that exhibiting all the symptoms of a bad case of apoplexy is going to—”

“Where have you been, by the way?”

“I had a few days’ leave, so I hopped over to Paris to—”

“Never mind, never mind. I can well imagine what you were up to. Meanwhile, the Hulk is rampaging through the land, disrupting the railroads.”

“Ah, so that’s the reason the trains aren’t operating in the black anymore.”

“And what do you think he pulled off this afternoon?”

“Escaped from your minions again, if that memo’s to be believed.” He settled more comfortably into his chair.

“He smashed up a freight train,” said Thunderbolt Ross, voice booming. “Ripped up about a half mile of track and threw a hunk of it at some very damned expensive choppers.”

Quartermain smiled, his even, white teeth flashing. There was always something a shade unnerving about that smile. “He’s a very inventive chap, our Hulk.”

“We have to catch him. We have to bring him here.”

“So I’ve heard.”

Ross’ thick forefinger jabbed at the air between them. “You’re supposed to be helping, instead of galavanting off to foreign shores to pinch fannies and—”

“General, my main reason for going to Paris was food,” explained Quartermain. “I’ve been meaning to mention that the cafeteria here at Gamma Base is dreadful, though I suppose the odds against finding a man who is both a secret agent and a gourmet chef are—”

“Let’s keep our minds on business,” General Ross suggested in an extremely loud voice. “You’re supposed to be concerned with that, too.”

“And I am, General. But I think more subtle tactics—”

“I’ve already sent out another air team to track him down and bring him in.”

“I admire you, having your own private holy Grail. I imagine you’ll be at a loss for a pastime once the Hulk is netted.” Quartermain eased up out of his chair and began to examine the scatter of papers atop the massive metal desk. “Still keeping tabs on Rick Jones, I see.”

“He’s a buddy of the Hulk—we have to keep the damned kid under surveillance:”

“Appears the lad has wended his way to a place with the romantic name of Crater Falls.”

“You know who’s living in that town, don’t you?”

“No one of great importance, I bet.”

“Dr. Rudolf Stern.”

Quartermain’s eyebrows raised. “Rudy Stern? He was a pleasant chap, almost human. One of the few people associated with Gamma Base, present company excepted, who had even a trace of a sense of humor.”

“That’s just what the world needs, funny scientists.” Ross drummed his blunt fingertips on the desktop. “I don’t like those two getting together.”

“If I know Rick, he’s looking up Rudy to see if the good doctor can help Banner.”

“Damn it, we don’t want anybody else helping him!” boomed Thunderbolt Ross. *“We’re* going to help him!”

“Well, you should have held on to Stern when he was here.”

“Gamma Base can’t detain people, not civilian types. This is, after all, a democracy we live in.”

“Oh, so?” Quartermain slumped in his chair again. “Our mutual chum, the Hulk, will be happy to hear that next time you lock him up.”

“He’s a different case,” said Ross with a snort. “The Hulk is different.”

“That he is,” agreed Quartermain.

Six

“Didn’t know you young guys went in for stuff like that. Where’d you learn it?”

“Out in Montana a couple of years ago,” Rick Jones replied. “A cowboy, a very old cowboy, taught me.” He set his guitar aside, leaned back against the porch railing and gazed up at the sky.

A lot of stars up there, blurred slightly by drifting clouds.

Slim Reisberson shifted in the wicker porch chair he was sprawled in. The only other boarder at the moment, Slim worked a few blocks away in Leiber’s Garage. “My dad used to sing that song, years back when I was a kid, and I’m near fifty now. Long time ago.”

The screen door opened and Linda, very pretty in a simple cotton dress, emerged into the night to join them. “That was very pretty, Rick,” she said, “what I could hear from the kitchen.”

“I wanted to help you with the dishes.”

“No, I’m terribly old-fashioned,” she said, smiling as she settled onto the porch’s other chair. “There’s woman’s work and man’s work. You I hired for the man’s jobs. Okay?”

Rick grinned. “Okay, but I feel like a sexist pig.”

“You’ll get over it, if you stay in Crater Falls long,” the girl said.

Slim yawned. “Boy, I don’t know what’s ailing me lately. I get me about ten hours’ sleep most nights, and still I’m tired most of the time.” Yawning again, he stretched up out of the creaking chair. “Think I’ll catch me a little sex and violence on the tube and then turn in. Night, Miss Linda. Night, Rick. Like to hear more of your songs.”

“Anytime, Slim—unless I’m busy with my man’s work.”

Chuckling, Slim went inside the house.

After a few quiet seconds, Linda said, “I tried phoning Dr. Stern’s house again. Still no answer.”

“Have to wait until tomorrow.”

The girl folded her hands in her lap. “This friend of yours . . . Bruce Banner, you said his name was?”

“That’s it, yeah.”

“I was wondering,” Linda went on, watching the young man’s face, “why you’re doing all this for him.”

Rick replied, “We’re friends.”

“Yes, I understand that, except I sense . . . don’t mean to pry . . . I have the feeling you think you’re responsible somehow for Mr. Banner’s illness.”

Picking up his guitar, Rick started strumming random chords. “Good guess,” he said.

“But are you really?” she said. “Devoting your life to someone else’s problems is a sure way to have no life of your own. I know, because my aunt gave away most of her life to look after me.”

“Maybe it was the other way around,” Rick suggested. “Could be you were really, from what you told me at dinner, looking after her. I never knew my parents; I grew up in a kind of pass-around way. Still, I know parents and relatives can make you think they’re doing something for you when really it’s the opposite.” He stood up. “Hell, I don’t know why I got so philosophical. Won’t happen again. Good night now, Linda.”

“Rick,” she said softly as he started for the door.

“Yeah?”

She smiled. “It’s nice to have you with us, whatever your reasons are.”

“Thanks.” He felt good about that all the way up the stairs to his room.

Something shuffled through the darkness.

A faint, steady shuffling. Sufficient to tatter his dreams and pull him, slowly, back to the waking world.

“Huh?” Rick sat up in bed, disoriented, not knowing where he was.

He sucked in several breaths of air and rubbed at his sleep-crusted eyes.

“Crater Falls,” he told himself. “Linda’s boardinghouse. It’s okay, nothing to panic over.”

It was only someone walking in the hall outside his closed bedroom door. Walking in a foot-dragging way.

He yawned, scratched at his bare chest, then settled down into the tangle of sheets and blanket.

A fainter shuffling drifted in through his open window along with the night breeze.

“In a minute you’ll be looking for burglars under the bed,” he said to himself. He bunched up the pillow and nuzzled his head into it.

Something besides shuffling. A faint humming, a hum of people. He was certain now that there were several people out in the street below.

“Okay, take a look. Probably a few dudes coming home from the local pub,” he rationalized.

Rick swung out of the soft bed, then padded to the window and squinted out. The crisp white curtains fluttered into his face. Pushing them aside, he leaned out for a better look.

There were at least ten people out there on the moonlit street. Men, women, even a boy of about eleven. They were moving along the sidewalk in single file, and they looked to be aiming for the center of the little town. Their feet dragged in a sleep-walking sort of way, and most of them seemed to be murmuring something low under their breath.

Rick’s eyes widened and he came fully awake. “I don’t know that much about small-town customs, but this seems sort of strange.”

He stumbled back to the old bureau beside his bed, snatched up his watch, and brought it close to his face. The faintly glowing hands told him it was past midnight.

“Could be I’m a busybody,” he said, retrieving his pants from a chair and tugging them on. “But my curiosity’s aroused.” He pulled on his shirt, found his shoes, and stepped into them.

For some reason he decided it would be wisest to open the door of his bedroom very quietly.

Rick did that, listening for a moment before stepping into the hall. A single nightlight burned in the hallway below.

As he moved downstairs, Linda, fully dressed, crossed the fuzzy circle of pale light.

“Something wrong?” he called down.

The girl didn’t answer, didn’t turn. Deliberately, she moved to the door and stepped outside.

“Hey, Linda!” He galloped down the steps two at a time, sprinted across to the door, and followed the girl out into the midnight air. “Linda, what the hell is wrong?”

She paid him no mind. She walked to the sidewalk and joined the nocturnal procession.

Stopping on the damp lawn, he saw at least twenty people now, coming along all the side streets, heading for the town square. They all moved in that same shambling way, eyes fixed straight ahead. He drew in another deep breath before loping out to the sidewalk and trailing Linda.

The girl was nearly half a block ahead of him now, making up one of the file of pedestrians.

“Linda, what’s wrong here? Can’t you hear me when—”

Pam!

He hadn’t been paying attention to what was going on behind him. Intent on Linda, he’d allowed someone to sneak up on him.

Rick was never sure what he had been hit with. Whatever it was it sent him stumbling into the gutter.

A second smashing blow over the head stretched him out in the street. The moonlight disappeared. The night closed in around him.

Seven

The driverless car came rolling down the early morning street. It moved faster and faster toward the five small children who were crossing the unguarded intersection on their way to the small country school.

The six-year-old blonde girl saw it first. She cried out and dropped the handful of wildflowers she'd been bringing to her teacher. The other four turned to look, but were unable to move. They were hypnotized by the ton of bright painted metal which was rushing toward them.

Then the ground began to shake. A huge green shape shot out of the wooded area next to the roadway.

Thrunp!

The Hulk planted himself between the car and the kids. The runaway vehicle smacked to a dead stop against his massive body and accordioned into a mangled pile of ruined auto parts and twisted metal.

The man-brute grunted once, softly, as he effortlessly picked up the shattered car and deposited it almost

disdainfully against the curb. Then, tentatively, he lumbered over to the cluster of stunned and silent children.

For a moment they stared at one another, the monster and the youngsters, the Hulk's heavy emerald head cocked to one side in obvious fascination. Then, his decision made, the Hulk swept the startled children to the sidewalk with short, shooing motions of his awesomely powerful hands.

Four of the children scurried instantly, dashing to the opposite sidewalk. There they huddled, watching the man-brute cautiously, their eyes wide.

The little blonde girl didn't budge. She stood crying, staring at the trampled bouquet lying at her feet. "All my flowers got wrecked."

The Hulk studied the tiny face, the tears rolling slowly across the freckled cheeks. Finally, he placed one massive hand, as gently as he could, on her shoulder. "Don't cry," he grumbled softly.

"How'd you make the car get smashed like that?" she asked, gazing up at him, unafraid.

"Hulk is strong."

"But what are you doing here? You don't go to school with us."

"Hulk slept in woods." He gestured. "Then Hulk heard car, heard you scream. Hulk came to help."

"You sure ran awful fast. I bet you can run faster than Maggie Thompson, even."

"Maggie . . . Thompson?"

"Yeah. She's in the third grade and she thinks she's so fast."

"Hulk is fast, too."

A car came churning up the road, its angry horn shattering the morning stillness.

The Hulk gave the little girl a careful nudge. “You go to school now.”

“My name is Emily. Is yours just Hulk?”

“Just . . . Hulk.” The jade-hued giant escorted her across the street.

The four other children backed away from each thudding step the Hulk took toward them.

Brakes squealed. “What in blazes is going on here?”

The car stopped short in the middle of the road, and a chubby man with rimless spectacles bounded out. “That car is damned well smashed to pieces, and . . . good God!”

Obviously, the fat man saw the Hulk more clearly now.

“The big green man broke the car so it wouldn’t hurt us, Mr. Marcus,” a little red-haired boy called out to the man in the street.

“Go on, kids,” ordered Mr. Marcus, who ran the town’s only movie theater. “Run inside now. Then tell your teacher to call the police.”

The Hulk glared. “You would call more puny humans to bother Hulk, little man?”

Mr. Marcus swallowed hard, making his Adam’s apple protrude. “You just leave these kids alone, you monster!” he ordered nervously as he backed toward his car.

Snarling, the Hulk charged the idling machine. “You just leave Hulk alone, little man—or Hulk will smash!”

Kasmack!

He caved in most of the hood of Mr. Marcus’s three-month-old station wagon before loping away into the woods.

The green phone buzzed.

With a throaty chuckle, General Thunderbolt Ross snatched up the receiver and clamped it to his ear. “What?”

“We have some good news, sir.”

“So tell me already.”

“The Hulk was spotted some fifteen minutes ago in the town of Harlansville, Missouri. Apparently, he was attacking a defenseless group of schoolchildren who—”

“The Hulk doesn’t attack little kids,” said Thunderbolt Ross. “Your witnesses are cockeyed. I’d wager all they really saw was an ordinary pervert.”

“Pervert or not, sir, this fellow was seven feet tall and bright green.”

The general leaned back in his swivel chair, tugging at his moustache. “Yeah, that’s our boy,” he said. “Okay, we’ll get him this time.” He hung up the green phone. Then he picked up a red one and punched out some numbers.

“Field Team,” came the crisp answer after only one ring.

“They’ve located the Hulk in a town called Harlansville, Missouri, wherever the heck that is,” Ross barked into the phone. “Bring him in . . . use Operation Peapod.”

“Operation Peapod? Are you certain—”

“You heard me! Now, get hustling!” He pronged the phone, then steepled his fingers and chuckled. “We’ve got him now! This time we’ve finally got him!”

Eight

The sunlight splashed against his face. Moaning, Rick rolled over in bed.

“In bed?”

He sat up suddenly, causing another, and more intense, moan. His head throbbed, and his stomach felt as though it were filled with bowling balls and broken glass. Sitting up so rapidly had made him dizzy, as well.

Swallowing, planting his hands palms down on either side of himself, Rick waited out the spell of wooziness.

He was, he noticed, dressed only in his undershorts. That was the way he usually slept, and so waking up that way shouldn’t have been so unsettling.

Except that last night Rick had followed a procession of the good citizens of Crater Falls along the midnight streets of the town. And one of those good folks had bopped him over the head.

Gingerly, he reached up and felt at the back of his head. “Ow,” he remarked, locating a substantial bump. A very real bump.

“Obviously,” he reasoned, “they didn’t want me to follow them last night.”

He put his bare feet on the floor and gritted his teeth against the wave of nausea that this latest movement visited upon him. Someone, very considerately, had hung his clothes over the room’s lone chair. Did a neater job than he usually managed to do.

“Now, where the hell was that parade of zombies headed?” Cautiously, treating his body like an extremely delicate machine, Rick stood up and managed to get himself dressed. “Wherever it was, they didn’t want strangers horning in.”

He moved to the window and stood for several minutes watching the street below. Linda was in on it, too, pretty homespun Linda. That really bothered him. They beat him up, hauled him up here, and dumped him. And she never lifted a finger.

“No, but she couldn’t,” he reminded himself. “Sure, it was Linda I saw marching away from here last night, except I’m damned certain she’d been drugged or something.”

Why? That’s what didn’t make any sense. Everybody had looked just as mindless and zombie-like as Linda. So who was doping the people on such a scale? And how? By dumping drugs in the town water supply? By sending out brain-control messages over the local radio station?

“However they’re doing it, and whoever’s doing it . . . we’re talking about a big operation.” Rick turned away from the window and the bright street. “For all I know, the whole damned population of Crater Falls goes trucking down Main Street at night.”

What exactly was going on in this nice little town?

Linda looked pretty; Slim Reisberson looked tired.

“Guess I overslept,” said Rick as he settled into his place at the kitchen table.

“Well, since it’s your first day on the job, I’m going to let you get away with it.” Linda smiled, perfectly naturally. There was nothing in her manner to indicate that she knew what had happened to him last night.

“You know,” remarked Slim, “it’s getting so even my morning coffee don’t perk me up. I feel lazier than the millionaire dog that hired the midget to scratch his fleas.”

Rick watched the mechanic while helping himself to cereal and milk. “From the look of you, Slim, I’d guess you were out on the town last night. Got all the telltale signs.”

“Nope, I was in the sack by ten last night and I slept right on till that darned alarm ripped into me this morning.” He yawned before pouring himself a second cup of coffee.

Sprinkling substitute sugar on his breakfast food, Rick said, “Maybe you ought to see a doctor.” He was convinced Slim thought he was telling the truth. Yet, Rick was certain the man had been part of that ghostly march last night.

“Aw, I been to Doc Hedley, and all he says is I’m working too hard,” Slim informed him. “Give me some tonic to take, which turns out to be about ninety percent alcohol. Stuff cheers me up, but it don’t take my tiredness away for long.”

Rick ate his cereal in silence for a moment. Then, turning to Linda, he said, “I’d like to call on Dr. Stern before I start my chores this—”

“Oh, Rick!” She was staring at him, rising up in her chair. “I just noticed your poor head. It’s all caked with blood. Why didn’t you say something? What on earth happened?”

A very good performance, or did she really have no idea how his injury had come about?

“Must be the new environment,” he lied. “I rolled out of bed last night and banged my head against the chair leg.”

“I’m so sorry. You’d better let me clean that off and put something on it.”

“Take her up on the offer,” advised Slim, leaving the table. “You go to Doc Hedley and he’ll soak you for five bucks. Well, sir, believe I’ll drag on down to the garage. Bye, folks.”

When Slim was gone, the girl came around behind Rick’s chair. “That’s a nasty looking bump, Rick. You should have come to me as soon as it happened.”

“Happened in the middle of the night. I wasn’t too wide awake, Linda. I just crawled back into bed,” he said, turning so he could study her face. “Besides, I wouldn’t have wanted to wake you up.”

“That’s ridiculous. If anything like this happens again, you come right down to me.”

“Isn’t likely anything like this’ll happen again.”

“I sure hope not.” After she had finished tending to his wound, Linda sat down and poured herself fresh coffee.

“So, can you spare me for an hour or so?” Rick asked. “I know it’s not a terrific way to start a new job, except I’d really like to catch Dr. Stern this morning if he’s back.”

“He isn’t,” said the girl. “I already tried to phone him.”

“He’s been gone longer than usual, hasn’t he?”

Nodding, Linda said, “I am sort of worried about him. Not that much can happen to him in Crater Falls, I suppose. Still, he may have had an accident out in the woods.”

Pushing his half-full cereal bowl aside, Rick rested his elbows on the table. “Maybe I ought to go hunting for him.”

“I don’t know, Rick, there are several square miles of countryside you’d have to search, and you don’t really know this area well at all.”

“I’m pretty good at finding things,” he told her. “When you’ve been on the road as long as I have, you get used to new places pretty fast.”

She said, “Tell you what, we’ll make an expedition of it. I’ll come with you.”

“Hey, that’ll be fine. Can you spare the time?”

“I think maybe I’d better,” the frowning girl replied.

Nine

He came thumping down the grassy hillside, out of the shadow-striped forest and into the glare of the midday sun.

“Hulk has walked a long time,” he muttered.

The bright meadowland stretched all around him for miles, dotted here and there with mounds of rocks and boulders. There was no sign of life; he was for the moment the only person in the world.

The green giant trudged on. He saw rocky hills on the horizon, hills where he should be able to hide until everybody stopped looking for him.

“Always they look for Hulk,” he reminded himself. “They never stop.”

A flock of birds wheeled up out of the woods behind him and scattered across the clear blue sky.

“Bah! More trouble!” In glancing after the retreating birds, he’d seen something else.

Far off, a half-dozen dots bobbed in the sky, blurring, then coming into focus and blurring again.

“Planes! Stupid people try to hurt Hulk!”

The emerald colossus spun on one huge heel and started bounding back up toward the shelter of the wooded hillside he’d recently left.

For a few seconds, the Hulk thought the woods were coming to meet him. Trees were rising up along with brush and chunks of mossy ground. It was all tumbling down the hillside at him.

Then came the two military tanks, huge growling machines bumping clear of the forest, their mounted cannons pointing at the Hulk like accusing fingers.

“Go away!” he warned. “Or Hulk will smash!”

The tanks kept rumbling toward him. With a chesty roar, the green giant ran to the nearest pile of boulders. He hefted up one of the largest, one almost as large as himself, and sent it hurtling through the air.

Smang!

The boulder dropped down on the tank, snapping its cannon in half and producing a massive dent in its body. The surviving tank began following a zigzag course, keeping the cannon trained on the Hulk.

He, in the meantime, had selected another formidable boulder. He lifted it as though it weighed no more than a beachball and sent it whirring into the tank.

Kasmash!

The hillside shook and the high grass swayed as the green giant ran down and away from the two disabled tanks.

“Hulk warned you!”

He checked the sky. The helicopters were much nearer, although they didn’t appear to be moving toward him as rapidly as they might have.

Down below him he spotted dust clouds rising far to his left. A line of Jeeps and military transport trucks was

grinding along the country road.

“More puny humans try to hurt Hulk!”

He became aware now of yet another sound—a distant whine cutting across the sky.

Three jet fighters were rocketing into view. The Hulk didn’t realize it, but Operation Peapod was in full swing.

“Attention, Hulk! Attention!”

Down on the narrow road a Jeep had halted and a portly man with a red-flushed face and a bullhorn was addressing the Hulk from the bonnet of the machine.

“We have this entire area cordoned off! You will not be able to escape!”

“Hulk always escapes!” he roared. Snatching up first one boulder and then another, he started them cascading down across the meadow.

“We are giving you a chance to surrender peacefully. Otherwise, we’ll take whatever measures . . . what the hell!”

Kaslam!

A boulder smacked into the Jeep’s side and tipped it over. The lieutenant colonel, his military decorations gleaming in the sun, went somersaulting off his perch. He hit down in the scrub at the side of the road, his bullhorn landing, with a thunk, in the pit of his substantial stomach.

The three jets were nearly overhead. Missiles belched out of their undersides, zooming down at the Hulk. They exploded all around him, and suddenly he was engulfed in a thick bluish gas.

It was unlike any gas they’d tried on him before. This stuff made the massive green man feel suddenly weak and strange.

“No! Hulk will fight puny gas!”

He began flapping his arms, flapping faster and faster, making the green flesh of his broad chest bead with sweat.

He achieved the required windmill effect and the debilitating gas began to disperse, to drift away across the slanting meadow.

The jets banked and made another pass at him. Again their rocket mounts went to work, and more missiles came hurtling down.

Two of the three projectiles had a small green circle stenciled on their sides, and one of these landed a few feet from the green giant. The regular missile had exploded and new gas was already thick around him. Then, out of the rocket with the green circle, a bubble began to grow.

The missile hissed; the bubble grew and enlarged and rolled over the Hulk. In a moment he was inside it, like a gum-machine prize trapped in plastic. He was inside the huge bubble with enough gas to knock him out.

“Bah! Puny humans cannot trap Hulk! Hulk will smash your puny bubble!”

But the bubble was composed of an incredibly tough synthetic. Once its target was caught inside it, the substance hardened. And even the massive green fists of the Hulk couldn’t crack it, couldn’t even dent it.

“Hulk will escape, little men, and then Hulk will crush you all!” he promised, pounding desperately against his transparent prison.

He struggled in vain. They’d caught him snugly inside their impervious plastic pod.

But still the Hulk kept smashing, pounding, pummeling, until the final moment when the bluish gas pushed him over into unconsciousness.

Ten

The forest was growing increasingly silent; the shadows seemed to be deepening. They were moving in single file along a wooded path, Rick in the lead.

“You notice anything odd?” he asked the auburn-haired girl.

“Getting quieter,” Linda replied. “Fewer birds singing, fewer animals chattering and rustling around.”

“What’s the reason?”

She shook her head. “Nothing I can think of. We are getting closer to the crater, though that shouldn’t make any difference.”

“Oh, yeah, the famous crater which gave Crater Falls its name,” Rick said, grinning. “What is it, anyway? I mean, it’s not a volcano or anything?”

“Legend has it the crater was caused by a huge meteor,” Linda replied, “meteor that probably struck hundreds of years ago and is still buried down under the ground.”

“Hasn’t anybody, a team of scientists, perhaps, ever excavated?”

Smiling, she said, “Our crater is sort of a landmark, and it’s the town’s only claim to fame, just about. Dig it up and what’s left? We’d have to re-christen ourselves Hole-in-the-Ground Falls, or No-more-Crater Falls.”

Rick laughed with her. Then, gradually, a frown began to furrow his forehead. Finally, he said, “There’s absolutely no noise now, not a single damned bird warbling, not even a leaf rustling.”

Moving closer, Linda took hold of his hand. “It is strange, Rick. You think maybe we ought to head back?”

“Not quite yet, but we’d better be cautious.”

“I wonder if this is why Dr. Stern comes out this way so often—because of the silence.”

“Don’t think so, unless it ties in with his research,” answered Rick, keeping hold of the girl’s hand and moving, more slowly, ahead on the leafy trail. “Did he mention the crater to you?”

“He is interested in it, though he never told me why. There’s something out here, in this whole area surrounding the crater, which fascinates him.”

“And he brings equipment with him, stuff to test for radiation levels and such?”

“I don’t know one instrument from another, Rick, but yes, Dr. Stern is usually loaded down with some of his gadgets. I remember kidding him once about—”

“Hold it.” Rick suddenly halted, let go of her, and bent over to pick something up. “Well, here’s a scientific instrument, although anyone could have lost it.” He held his palm toward her, showing the smashed compass he’d spotted on the path.

Linda inhaled sharply. “I’m fairly certain that’s his,” she said, pointing at it. “I remember seeing it on his desk, Rick.

He must have dropped it, then stepped on it.”

“It got dropped, but it’s too mangled for just getting stomped on.” Rick dumped the remainder of the compass in a pocket of his jeans. “Besides, Dr. Stern would probably have picked it up again.”

“Then, what do you think—”

“Wait now.” Rick had glanced to his right. He saw something, or a hint of something, in the deep shadows some fifty yards off. “Over there, among those trees.”

“I don’t see . . . oh, I do—some sort of glow.”

“Yeah, a faint green glow.” He patted her twice on the arm. “Stay right here, rooted to the spot, while I go to—”

“I grew up in this town. I know how to travel through the woods without the benefit of a trail.”

“I’m certain you do, except if that’s what I think it is the farther off you stay, the better.”

“What do you mean? Some kind of radiation?”

He nodded. “Yep.”

“Then you ought to—”

“I seem to be moderately immune to this particular kind of radiation, because . . . well, on account of something that happened a while ago.” Not wishing to explain further, he left Linda on the narrow trail and cut into the shadowy woods.

The greenish glow guided him like a beacon. He moved steadily toward it, ignoring the thorny brush and tangled branches which tore and slapped at him.

“Be careful, Rick,” Linda called.

Her voice sounded very far away.

Rick’s certainty as to what he was going to find was mounting. The silence and shade encircled him, cutting him off from the girl. He pressed on, working toward the glow of green.

And then he was looking down at the body of a dead man—a dead man whose face was contorted, whose limbs were twisted. His hiking clothes were tattered, and his corpse pulsed with an unearthly green glow.

“It’s Dr. Stern,” Rick recognized at once, “but what killed him?”

Obviously the doctor had been exposed to tremendous gamma radiation. There was ample evidence, though, that he’d also been attacked. By animals or by humans? It wasn’t clear.

Shaking his head, swallowing hard, Rick began to back away from the green-glowing corpse. As he became aware of the outside world again, he heard a thrashing behind him.

“Rick, what is it?” He turned and saw that Linda was making her way toward him.

“Stay right there. I don’t want you to get any closer.”

He ran, stumbling, snapping twigs underfoot, right to her. “Stay away, damn it!”

“Is it Dr. Stern?”

He reached the girl, put his hands on her shoulders, then caught his breath. “Yeah, it’s him. He’s dead.”

“Oh,” she said quietly, lowering her head. “He was a very . . . brilliant man. Such a shame he . . . how did he die?”

Putting an arm around her shoulders, Rick headed for the trail. “There’s a possibility he was murdered, since—”

“Nobody in Crater Falls would . . . this isn’t the sort of place where people get murdered.”

“It is now,” Rick said, “or at least I’m inclined to think so. What’s your law-and-order situation?”

“We have a sheriff, Sheriff Anmar.”

“Okay.” Rick nodded. “We’ll hike back into town and report all this to the sheriff.”

“But can we just leave Dr. Stern here?”

“We have to. The radiation he’s giving off . . . well, I don’t think it’s safe to handle him. We’ll have to warn the sheriff of that, too.”

Linda wiped at the corner of her eye. “All at once we’re talking about Dr. Stern as though he’s just an object, something to be disposed of.”

They reached the trail. “Didn’t mean to,” Rick said. “The thing is, Linda, at this point we simply don’t know what killed him. Look, it could kill us, too.”

“I understand. It’s only that . . . all right, let me make sure I know exactly where we are, so I can give Sheriff Anmar the location.”

As they started back toward town, Rick said, “Got a hunch this is only the start of something bigger.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not,” he answered, “exactly sure.”

Eleven

“Quite comfortable, actually, old man.”

“For a cell.”

“You persist in looking at the situation that way, eh, Doctor?”

Bruce Banner was sitting on the edge of a narrow bed. His room was a cube, with walls of incredibly strong metal. They’d been painted a somber shade of blue. There were no windows, and the one door could be opened only from the outside.

“Isn’t that what you call the place a prisoner is kept—a cell?” Banner asked Quartermain.

The handsome blond man said, “You’re rather a special case, old boy.” He paused to grin. “And that may well be the understatement of this century. Face it, Dr. B., you are unique.” He took a few steps toward him. “When apprehended, you were in the process of rending valuable government property asunder at an impossible rate of

speed, laying waste to vast stretches of peaceful countryside."

"You're talking about the Hulk," Banner cut in, "not me. I did none of those things. None of them!"

"Ah, you've placed your finger squarely on the nub of the problem," said the SHIELD agent. "When they popped you into that plastic pod and let the gas do its work, you were an enormous greenish chap. Yet somewhere between there and Gamma Base you returned to this form I see before me—mild-mannered, witty, urbane—"

"That always happens. The Hulk goes away and I return," said Banner, hands gripping the edge of the bed. "How'd you knock him out so efficiently? He should have been able to break out of that bubble."

"New invention of Gamma Base." Quartermain leaned casually against the metal wall near Banner's cot. "I must tell you, you keep all the lads around here on their toes. Always coming up with new and better Hulk traps. You've inspired more scientific breakthroughs than the space program or—"

"It's not me they're trying to catch!" Banner insisted. "It's the Hulk!"

"Exactly, old man."

"Then why do you keep hounding me?"

"Because you're in the same unenviable position as that chap in the story by Robert Louis Stevenson. The good *doctor* was a perfectly respectable sort, but that *Hyde* fellow was another bag of goods altogether," said Quartermain.

"There's no parallel. I didn't willingly ask to share my body with the Hulk. This thing that's happened isn't anything I ever wanted."

"Seems to me, sport, the parable does apply. One shouldn't tamper with nature's secrets or one is liable to get a cosmic kick in the slats."

“Why do they keep you on the payroll? You’re obviously too much of a wiseass to get along with Thunderbolt Ross.”

“On the contrary, the old boy dotes on me,” returned Quartermain, folding his arms across his broad chest. “And, in case you haven’t guessed it, he’s watching this little *tête-à-tête* at this very moment.”

“Your mikes and cameras aren’t that well hidden.”

“The good general is a bit sheepish about approaching you directly as yet. Thinks you may bear him a grudge because of the somewhat drastic way he got you here to Gamma Base.”

Banner said, “You guys work like cops—the tough one and the nice one. Right now it’s your turn to play nice guy, to soften me up.”

Giving a mock gasp, Quartermain said, “My boy, I assure you I *am a* nice guy. I am also a prince of good fellows, and a man among men. You really ought to lend an ear to my spiel.”

Banner stood, facing him. “Don’t you understand what I’ve been telling you? I am not the Hulk. I’m sick unto death of being persecuted as though I were. I have to live like some damned runaway slave from the last century and—”

“This copout simply won’t work, old man,” interrupted Quartermain. “You are Dr. Bruce Banner, respected scientist, and you are also the bloody Hulk, enormous green weirdo. You have to face that fact, my friend.”

Banner looked away from him. “Maybe you’re right,” he admitted in a low voice. “But I never asked for any of this, never wanted—”

“Come now. Who does ask for the dreadful things life dumps on one’s doorstep now and again? What we all have to do, don’t you see, is learn to grin and bear it.”

“Okay, fine, Quartermain. I’d like to do that, but on my own. In solitude. I never should have gone into government

work in the first place."

"Old man, if you keep forcing me to deliver obvious home truths," said Quartermain, "I'm going to start feeling like your blooming psychiatrist and charge you an outrageous fee for my time. What happened back at the gamma bomb test, that's the past, the dead past. All we have to work with is *now."*

"And now I'm a prisoner."

"Our guest," corrected the SHIELD agent. "A fellow we very much want to help."

"Help is one way of putting it." Banner sat again on the cot. "What you guys here at Gamma really want to do is study me, poke and probe, take me apart. I wouldn't be surprised if somebody in this enlightened government of ours hasn't suggested you find out how to mass-produce Hulks. Sure, make a whole army of 'em and send 'em off to invade Africa or Cuba or whichever country it is we think we have a foreign policy problem with this week."

"An army of Hulks?" Quartermain chuckled. "I wouldn't want to be sitting in the reviewing stand when they passed by on parade." He unfolded his arms, placed his hands on his hips. "Enough of this verbal fencing, Banner. I truly do think we can help you here—not exploit, mind you, but help. You hate the Hulk. Very well, let us find out where he comes from and how to control him."

"Company line," said Banner scornfully. "Cheap propaganda to make me into a willing guinea pig."

Quartermain looked directly at the other man for a moment. "You have my word that such is not the case," he said evenly and slowly. "If you really do want to kick this green-giant habit, Doctor, then what say we knock off the self-pity and get down to the job at hand?"

For a silent moment the two men watched each other.

Then Banner said, "Okay, I'll trust you. What next?"

Quartermain told him.

Twelve

Sheriff Anmar was big and wide. On the porch of the boardinghouse, he was scratching a thumb through his short gray hair. “If you say so, Miss Linda.”

“Look at me, Sheriff,” the angry girl said. “I’m grown up and you don’t have to address me as though I were still in pigtails!”

“Shucks, Miss Linda, I ain’t trying to—”

“Could we backtrack a minute?” suggested Rick, who was standing near the porch railing. “I’m not quite clear yet as to why you came over and started accusing me of being a practical joker.”

“Now, there’s no need for everybody to get mad and jittery,” said the sheriff. “Miss Linda says she’ll vouch for your honesty, young fella, and I got to admit you made a favorable impression when you reported this alleged death to me this aft—”

“Alleged?” said Rick and Linda together.

“That’s what I been trying to tell you,” said the sheriff. “There’s no sign of a body out there in the woods. Me and

Gilbert Fox traipsed all around the spot you told me about, Miss Linda. Spent more than an hour."

"Are you sure it was the right place?" Rick asked.

"Young fella, me and this girl here are natives of Crater Falls. When Miss Linda gave me directions, she knew what she was doing, and I darned sure know how to follow them up," said Sheriff Anmar. "So I'm telling you, I don't know what you think you saw, but it ain't there now."

"It *was* there," persisted Linda. "Dr. Stern's body—we saw it!"

"Hold on, now. When you came busting in on me this afternoon, you told me you didn't actually see Doc Stern, Miss Linda. It was this young fella here who went near the body."

"I saw it glowing."

The sheriff made a dissatisfied tisking sound. "In some of the bigger towns hereabouts, I hear tell as how folks have hallucinations from taking—"

"We weren't on drugs, Sheriff," said Rick. "I saw the dead body of Dr. Stern in the woods today. He'd obviously been exposed to a massive dose of Gamma—"

" 'Bout three years back, Old Man Mott thought he seen a flying saucer," said Sheriff Anmar. "That was the last time we had anybody green reported in the vicinity."

"Honestly, Sheriff, you're being incredibly stubborn," said Linda. "I think I'm a little more in control of my faculties than Mr. Mott. There was a green glow in the woods. Granted, I didn't get close enough to see the body. Rick did, though, and he's not a liar."

After giving his scalp another thorough rubdown, Anmar said, "How come you knew it was Doc Stern?"

Rick sighed. "I explained that this afternoon. I'd met him before, through a friend of mine, when he was doing government work. I came to town to visit him because—"

“Okay, okay,” said the sheriff. “So you knew what the doctor looked like. But it is possible, isn’t it, you was mistaken about what you thought you saw—”

“It wasn’t a stray weather balloon, Sheriff, or swamp gas, or light reflected off the clouds,” Rick assured him. “I am not goofy. This afternoon in the woods near the crater I found the body of Dr. Rudolf Stern. I don’t have any idea why it isn’t there now.”

The sheriff switched to his chin, started scratching at that. “Maybe I could send over to Lee’s Landing and borrow the bloodhounds they got.”

“What must have happened,” said Linda, “is that someone moved the body.”

“Why’d anybody do that?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, but if Dr. Stern wasn’t there, then somebody or something moved him.”

“We did find some trampled places out there, Miss Linda. But it’s hard to tell exactly what happened, since you and this young fella was roaming all over thereabouts,” said Sheriff Anmar. “Anyhow, we sure didn’t find any sign of a dead man.”

There was a silence. The light of the day was dropping out of the sky.

After a few seconds, the sheriff said, “Well, Miss Linda, I’ll see what else I can do about this. Probably tomorrow we’ll give it another try. Night, now. Night, young fella.”

After he’d gone lumbering away, Rick turned to the girl. “You don’t think I made it up?”

“Of course not,” Linda assured him. “But . . .”

“But what?”

“What *did* happen to the body?”

“Maybe,” said Rick, “it’s better if we don’t find out.”

“Jeez, it’s possible nobody ever sleeps in this damned town.” Rick, fully dressed, sat back from the window of his room.

The night was overcast; the street below was dark. Still, Rick was able to see the mysterious procession as it got going. Silently, they came easing out of their darkened houses, shuffling along like shadows, murmuring strange words, their faces dead. A town of sleepwalkers.

The boards out in the hall creaked. That must be Slim, dragging off to join them. *No wonder the poor guy is tired,* thought Rick. *He’s moonlighting and doesn’t even know it.*

Very faintly, the sound of the front door opening and closing drifted up to Rick. He stared down and saw Linda go floating out of the house.

“She’s one of them; that’s certain.”

One of what? He had to find out the purpose of these nocturnal marches.

But first I’m going to have to make a try at getting some help. Leaving the window, he crossed the floor of his bedroom and went toward his door. Even though he knew there was no one in the house anymore, Rick moved quietly.

The door wouldn’t open. Someone had locked it from the outside, and he hadn’t even heard it. Score one for their side.

“If I were Spider-Man, I could go out the window and climb down the side of the house. However . . .” Squatting, he fished out his pocket knife.

After about three minutes of fiddling, he succeeded in picking the lock. He opened the door cautiously and stepped out into the hall. He went down the carpeted stairs as silently as a burglar.

He waited in the dark downstairs hallway for a moment, listening. Nodding to himself, Rick went to the small table

which held the house’s only phone. He picked up the receiver and was glad to hear a dial tone.

Sometime ago, during an earlier encounter with Bruce Banner and General Thunderbolt Ross, Rick had gained access to a very special unlisted phone number. He was no great lover of authority. Like his friend Banner, he much preferred to go it alone. At the moment, however, there was trouble right here in Crater Falls, the kind of trouble Rick didn’t think he could handle by himself. And it didn’t look as though anybody in town, and that included Linda, could be trusted.

He dialed the number of Gamma Base.

Thirteen

They treated him much better now.

Didn’t keep him locked in his cell; let him wander at will in certain corridors. That was after he’d given his promise this morning to cooperate with Gamma Base in their study of him, and after one of the medics on staff had started dealing out tranquilizers with each meal, the theory being that a tranquil Bruce Banner was not likely to become the Hulk.

If only it were that simple, Banner thought.

From the other side of a pale blue door he was passing, he heard the raised voice of Thunderbolt Ross.

“Who? What in blue blazes . . . who wants to talk to me? Who? Rick Jones? Oh, yeah, that damned hippie . . .”

Banner stopped, glanced up and down the empty corridor, then placed an ear close to the door of the general’s private office.

“. . . might have something to say. Put the kid on. Hello? You’re where? Crater Falls? I knew that already, Jones, so if you phoned just . . . Sure, we keep an eye on you, and on all of . . . What? He’s dead? You’ve got to be . . . I know Dr. Stern was doing his own experimenting there and . . . Glowing green? Are you . . . Yeah, okay. I . . . what do you think did it? What? The sheriff says what? Jones? Jones! Hey, where the heck did he go? No, I don’t know where he was, exactly. Someplace in Crater Falls. Well, use your so-called brains and track the call down. Find out why we were cut off. I—”

“What happened?” Banner had entered Thunderbolt Ross’s office.

“Banner, why the hell are you busting into—”

“Let’s drop the protocol. Did something happen to Rick Jones?”

Ross hung up his blue phone, then narrowed his eyes. “How’d you know I—”

“You’re not exactly soft-spoken, General. I was passing and overheard you talking to him. Now, what went wrong?”

“You tell me.” He dropped, with a thump, down into his swivel chair. “Kid calls me up—I can guess how he got a security-guarded number like mine—and says Rudy Stern is dead.”

“I heard that part.” Stern had been a friend of his, long ago, before everything had changed. “I’m sorry to hear it. But what’s more important is—”

“The Jones kid was explaining to me what had happened. Then he made a funny noise and stopped talking.” Ross scowled. “You know as much as I do.”

“What is Rick doing in Crater Falls?”

“Don’t you know? I imagine he went to pester Dr. Stern, except somebody—”

His red phone rang. “General Ross here!” he boomed into the mouthpiece. “Thirty-six Chestnut Street, a place called Connelly’s Boardinghouse? Got it. Phone’s still off the hook? All right. I’ll issue instructions on how to proceed shortly. Stand by.” He hung up.

Banner said, “Looks as though someone in Crater Falls doesn’t want Rick to talk to us.”

“Could be, Banner. Or it could be he’s only trying to spoof the brass.”

“Not Rick. He—”

“All kids nowadays are halfwits. When I—”

“Rick phoned you because he didn’t know how to contact me. He obviously needs help. I want to fly over to—”

“Whoa! Hold on, Banner,” said the general. “You seem to forget you’re our guest at Gamma Base—a guest, let me remind you, who can’t leave.”

“Rick’s in trouble. Sitting here and throwing your authority around isn’t going to help him.”

“The entire situation will be handled.” Ross stood up again, planting his fists on his desk. “I don’t want anything to happen to Rick Jones, either, at least not until we learn what he knows about Rudy Stern’s death.”

“But I . . .” Banner got control of himself. There was no use arguing with Thunderbolt Ross. There were other, easier, ways to get away from Gamma Base. “Okay, I suppose you’re right. Sorry I lost my temper. You will, though, keep me informed?”

“That we will,” said the general, some of his frown lines diminishing. “I think you’re making progress already. Good night, then.”

When his back was to the general, Banner allowed himself a smile.

“Humble bachelor quarters, old man,” said Clay Quartermain from the black sling chair.

Banner glanced at the modern paintings on the room’s wall, then down at the thick carpet. “Well, your cell’s furnished on a slightly grander scale than mine, Clay.”

“Proving once again that it is better to be a keeper than one of the kept.”

In the armchair facing his host, Banner was striving to give the impression he was relaxed. “You will see what you can do about Rick Jones?”

“Might even pop over to Crater Falls on the morrow,” said the SHIELD agent, “should no new developments pop up tonight.”

“Do you have your own plane here?”

“Right, and my own piece of hangar to park it in. Another of the advantages of being on the right team.”

“I appreciate your talking to me.” Banner, very carefully, got up. “I was somewhat upset about the general’s refusal to let me see what’s happened to Rick. You’ve helped me get a better perspective, plus which, you brew a terrific cup of coffee.” He already held his cup in his hand and now he took the other man’s off the coffee table. “How about my fetching us one more cup each before I take off for my cell?”

Quartermain hesitated. “Fine, old man, though half a cup will suffice for me. Feel free to putter around my kitchen.”

Banner went into the small kitchen alone. Screened from Quartermain by a partition, he poured fresh coffee into each cup. Along with the coffee, he put three tranquilizers, which he’d managed to avoid taking as prescribed, into Quartermain’s cup.

“Coffee usually keeps me awake,” Banner remarked as he handed over the doctored cup. “Won’t mind tonight, though, since I’ve got some thinking to do.”

Sipping his coffee, the SHIELD agent said, “If it were up to me, old chap, I’d let you dash right over to Crater Falls. The generalissimo, I fear, is determined that you be kept on a very short leash.”

It took nearly twenty minutes for Quartermain to slump over into a doze.

Fourteen

“What do you mean, you’re afraid?”

The rumpled cab driver rolled his frayed toothpick around between his teeth. “Ain’t exactly that, Mister.”

“I’ve already offered you double your regular fee,” said Banner. “So if you aren’t afraid of money—”

“Can’t say exactly what it is”—the man was leaning against the side of his ancient taxi on the main street of the town—“except I know I don’t want to drive into Crater Falls at night.”

Indicating the dark sky, Banner said, “It’ll be dawn in a couple of hours.”

“Then I can take you. Daylight’s okay.”

Banner had hiked the two miles into the town of Lee’s Landing from the nearby private airfield. He’d landed the ship he’d borrowed from the unwitting Quartermain there and he’d skipped out before too many questions got asked.

Now he wasn’t anxious to lose any more time. “Where can I find another cab?”

“Ain’t none.”

“Look, you still haven’t given me much of a reason.”

The man was perspiring in spite of the night chill. “I tell you, Mister, it’s just a feeling. Feel like life’s a lot safer for me if I don’t go to Crater Falls after dark, almost as though . . .”

“As though what?”

“Oh, I was going to say as though someone warned me not to, ’cept, far as I can recollect, nobody ever did.”

“Crater Falls is fifteen miles from here?”

“About that, straight down the old highway over there.” He pointed south.

“Okay, if I can’t bribe you or cajole you, I’ll have to walk. Maybe I can thumb a ride.”

“Doubt it.” The driver opened his door and climbed inside his cab. “Seems like lately most nobody drives into Crater Falls—not at night.”

Frowning, Banner asked, “How long’s that been going on?”

“Few months, maybe. Don’t exactly know.” He rolled up his window.

Banner left him to begin hiking to Crater Falls. The cab driver turned out to be correct—there were no cars at all going in the direction of the town.

As Banner walked, he slid his hands inside his pockets. To get out of Gamma Base, he’d borrowed one of Quartermain’s distinctive jumpsuits and helmets. But after landing, he’d gotten back into his own clothes. Now the coldness of the predawn roadway was digging into him. He found himself shivering, teeth chattering.

Go back!

Banner slowed. He'd heard the harsh command inside his head.

Go back!

The words came knifing into his brain, bringing pain.

Stay away from Crater Falls!

The pain grew, sizzling through his body, trying to take control of him.

What was it? Some force—an alien force, Banner sensed—was beaming a telepathic message at him: not merely a message, but a command.

Go back until sunrise!

"Damned if I will," Banner said aloud, his voice shooting across the gray, empty fields beyond the road.

It is death! Death to come farther!

Banner began to run, though the pain was twisting through his body and the orders to stop were drumming inside his skull.

With each step, he realized he was changing. His lean arms grew thick and muscular, ripping the seams of his cotton shirt. His voice grew husky, coarse, until it became a heavy growl. He was no longer the dedicated young scientist.

Once again, Banner's anger had overwhelmed him. He had changed, had become the mammoth green man-brute known as the Hulk.

The telephathic messages kept stabbing into his brain, sending him warnings and spasms of intense pain. The Hulk ignored it all.

He trotted along the highway edge and the ground trembled at his passage.

Gray light began to filter down through the night blackness. Off in the woods the first bird began to sing.

Linda stopped digging. She climbed up out of the crater along her assigned pathway. Walking in the same somnambulistic way she had used in coming here from town hours ago, the girl carried her shovel to the place in the woods where it was supposed to be placed. She left it, then started back through the woods.

Her fellow townspeople were performing similar tasks. Having quit digging away at the vast hole in the crater's bottom, they were putting their spades and picks and barrows away and starting their dead-eyed shuffle back to their homes.

It was almost dawn when they arrived on the outskirts of Crater Falls. The town lay silent in the waning night—not even a dog dared bark.

Without a word, Linda went to her boardinghouse, climbed the front steps, and went inside. Slim was only fifty feet behind her, but she paid no attention to him. The lean mechanic came into the house and trudged up to his room without a word or a sign of recognition.

Linda took a shower in her private bathroom. Then, before slipping into her nightdress, she knelt and rinsed the last traces of crater earth down the drain in the floor of the shower stall. She carried her dirty clothes, stained with mud and perspiration, into the washroom and dropped them in the washer. She wouldn't look at them again until they were washed, wouldn't remember where she'd worn them.

All this done, the auburn-haired girl went to bed. She slept exactly two hours and thirteen minutes, before her bedside clock radio started playing the music and talk which awakened her each morning.

Fifteen

“Now, who the dickens are you?”

Banner lifted his head from the grass of the town-square park. Sitting up, he blinked at the big man who was squinting down at him. “I must have . . .” He noticed that his clothes were in tatters. “Had an accident . . . guess I passed out.”

He remembered, vaguely, fighting his way to town, struggling against waves of pain. No, that hadn’t been him; the Hulk had done that. And then . . . the struggle must have exhausted him. Yeah, that was it—the Hulk had found the center of town and collapsed on the dawn grass.

The change had come about again. So here was Banner waking up to find the sheriff looking down at him.

“What sort of accident, young fella?”

“Out on the highway.” Banner struggled to his feet. “Car hit mine, I think.”

“Is that so?” Sheriff Anmar took a step backward. “Well, sir, I’m Sheriff Anmar, just exactly the man you need. We’ll

hop in my car and go take a look. ’Course, the way things’ve been going, wouldn’t surprise me none if there weren’t no cars there.”

“We can do that later, but—”

“Want to see a sawbones first? Doc Hedley’s office is only about two—”

“No, it isn’t that, Sheriff.” Banner brushed at his tattered clothes. “The reason I came to Crater Falls is to find a friend of mine. I think he’s in trouble. His name is Rick Jones. Do you—”

“You a friend of Rick Jones?” The sheriff’s left eye nearly shut as he scrutinized Banner. “Now, ain’t that interesting. This very same young fella is the source of one of my biggest problems right now.”

“Where is he? Do you know?”

Sheriff Anmar scratched at his gray hair. “Why, I suppose he’s over to the boardinghouse.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well, I ain’t seen him since yesterday. Why?”

“Can we get over there right away? It’s on Chestnut Street, isn’t it?”

“Sure thing. Faster to walk, since my car’s parked way on the other side of the square and it’s been acting a mite—”

“Rick phoned me last night. In the middle of the call we were cut off,” lied Banner. “I haven’t been able to reach him since.”

The sheriff set the pace and the two men walked rapidly toward Linda Connelly’s boardinghouse. “How long you known this Rick Jones?”

“Quite a while,” Banner answered.

“How about Doc Stern? You know him?”

“Yes. He used to be a colleague of mine.”

“You a doctor, too?”

“Stern and I worked in similar scientific areas, Sheriff. What can you tell me about his death?”

“I can’t even tell you for sure that he had one,” replied the sheriff. “All I got to go on is hearsay, most of it from your young friend. I don’t have a body—I don’t have anything ’cept Rick Jones’s claim that he and Miss Linda found Doc Stern dead in the woods and glowing like a Christmas tree.”

“Some kind of radiation poisoning,” said Banner, almost to himself.

“If Jones is up and gone now, then I don’t even have me a witness. Sort of cancels out the whole case.” They turned off the sidewalk and up the path to the boardinghouse door. “You sure he ain’t fond of kidding around?”

“Not Rick. His sense of humor doesn’t run that way.” Banner was scanning the house and grounds. Everything seemed calm, peaceful, with nothing out of the ordinary.

Linda, looking bright and fresh in a pale green cotton dress, anticipated them and stepped out onto the porch. “Good morning, Sheriff. What’s happened to this gentleman?”

“Ain’t right sure, though he claims to have had himself an automobile accident.”

“Why’d you bring him here instead of—”

“I’d like to see Rick Jones,” said Banner. “I’m a friend of his and—”

“Oh, you must be Bruce Banner.”

He noticed she was an extremely attractive girl. Under other circumstances . . . but right now he had to find Rick. “Yes, I am.”

“I’m afraid he’s gone,” the girl said.

“Gone? Where?”

Linda gave a forlorn shake of her head. “I’m really not sure,” she said, glancing from one man to the other. “He

didn’t come down for breakfast, and after a while I went up to his room and knocked. When he didn’t answer, I went in. All his things are gone—clothes, guitar, everything.”

“Should have locked that young sprout up,” the sheriff reflected. “Got no more case at all. Anyway, I’m going to get back to my office and see if maybe I can start all over again from scratch on this.” After nodding at the girl and Banner, he hurried away.

Banner was studying the girl’s pretty face, wondering if she were telling the truth. “Last night Rick made a phone call from this boardinghouse, Miss Connelly,” he said carefully. “He was interrupted in the middle of it. Do you know why?”

She shook her head again. “I wasn’t aware that Rick had phoned anyone.”

“Were you home all evening?”

“Yes, of course. About what time was the call put through?”

“About midnight.”

“Funny, I was sure Rick was in his room and asleep long before that.”

“Where’s the phone?”

She gestured at the hallway behind her. “Right in the hall—it’s the only one.”

Banner stepped inside the house with her. “How far away is your room?” he asked, moving to the phone table.

“Down the hall, in the other direction.”

Everything in the hall was neatly in place. There was no lingering evidence that anything unusual had happened. “So you wouldn’t necessarily have heard him.”

“Not if he simply used the phone, Mr. Banner.” Linda looked unhappy. “But if, as you seem to imply, something

unusual took place . . . I certainly would have heard a scuffle or a fight.”

Banner said, “Rick was obviously upset over the death of Dr. Stern. Now, was there anything else he seemed worried about? Had he tangled with anyone in town, somebody who might be angry with him?”

“No, not that I . . . except . . .”

Banner took hold of her arm. “What?”

“Oh, it’s only that Rick had a pretty nasty bump on his head when he came down to breakfast yesterday.”

“You mean he’d been in a fight or an accident?”

“Rick explained it away by saying he’d fallen in his room, tripped in the dark or some such thing,” Linda said. “At the time, though, I thought it looked more as if something had hit him. I didn’t want to pry, so I accepted his explanation.”

“Have you noticed anyone hanging around?”

“No, nobody unusual. This is a small town . . . and a peaceable one, Mr. Banner.”

“Didn’t turn out that way for Dr. Stern.”

“We still don’t know for sure what killed him. It may turn out to be some side effect of his research.”

“A funny side effect that would dump him in the middle of the forest,” commented Banner, “and then later carry him away and hide him somewhere else.”

Linda turned partially away from him. “I get the impression you think I’m not telling the truth,” she said, “that I’m hiding something.”

“Are you?”

“Mr. Banner,” she said, facing him with her eyes narrowed and angry, “I liked Rick, and I’m sorry he left in such a hurry. The most logical explanation seems that he decided to move on. From what he told me, he was a footloose person, a wanderer.”

Banner asked, “Can you tell me where Dr. Stern lived?”

“Yes, but I don’t imagine you’ll find Rick there.”

“I’d like to see the house, maybe talk to his neighbors.”

Linda gave him the address and instructions on how to reach the house. “You may run into Mrs. Snell, his part-time housekeeper. But I doubt she’ll tell you anything.”

Moving to the screen door, Banner said, “In case Rick shows up here, ask him to wait for me.”

“Of course, although he must be miles from here by now.”

Banner didn’t think so. He didn’t say that to the girl, though. He merely said, “Thanks for your help, Miss Connelly.”

Sixteen

He found a back window he could open. Shielded by shrubbery, Banner climbed into Dr. Stern's silent house. There was no sign of any housekeeper about, and the nearest neighbor had a pole fence which prevented him from witnessing Banner's housebreaking.

The hallway he landed in smelled of dust and chemicals. After carefully closing the window behind him, Banner stood still and glanced around. Through an open door on his left he saw the corner of a desk and a section of book-lined wall.

"His study; might as well start there."

In the middle drawer of the old wooden desk, which Banner pried open with a souvenir paper-cutter from a long-ago World's Fair, he discovered a thick notebook bound in imitation black leather. The word *Journal* was printed across the cover in faded gold.

Settling into the doctor's chair, Banner skimmed through the book. "What the hell!" he exclaimed after a moment. He went back to an earlier section and read more carefully.

. . . clear idea as to what it is [Stern had written]. *I am, however, absolutely certain that there is something alive in that crater. I am, at the moment, utterly unable to explain how life can exist in such circumstances, since the gamma radiation coming from the crater is very high . . .*

. . . townspeople, beyond a doubt, are involved in this somehow. During my last exploration of the crater itself, I found unmistakable evidence of digging . . .

. . . he cannot control me as he does the others. True, his thoughts reach me and his commands resound in my head, but I am able to resist. I am relatively certain I am one of the few people, perhaps the only one in this town, who can fight off his will. What is frightening to contemplate is my certainty that he knows I cannot be made his slave. Thus, whatever his scheme, I must of necessity be dangerous to him . . .

. . . get near there. That much control over me he has. The intense pain he is able to transmit to me is preventing me from approaching too close to the crater any longer. I can only assume that the digging has continued, that whatever it is which is trapped in the earth is near to being released . . .

. . . can't I warn someone? If even part of what I suspect is true, this creature must be destroyed. Power such as it possesses must not be allowed to emerge into our world. Yet I find I am unable to lift up the phone and call for help from the outside. I can't discuss this with anyone, not even Linda Connelly, whom I trust. I have many political and moral differences with General Thaddeus Ross, yet I would gladly summon him now. If only I could! That thing in the crater forbids it. Although

he cannot, as yet, control me completely, he is able to keep me from warning the world outside. This little town is his domain; he rules it ruthlessly. Someday soon he'll be free, and then the whole world may become his kingdom. He allows me to record my thoughts in this journal, a futile gesture, at best . . .

. . . pain is almost continual. I have struggled against it, but I fear I am weakening. He wants me out there, out at the crater again. I am afraid to go, knowing it may well mean the end of my life. The pain will ease if I go; he has promised me that. If only I could do some . . .

Banner closed the book on its unfinished sentence. He rested back in the chair for a few seconds.

So that was what had happened to Rudy Stern. Some thing, a creature with a powerful intelligence, dwelled in the crater. It was using the people of the town to free it, and Stern had found out. Somehow Stern had been able, just as Banner had last night, to fight off the mental commands that entity projected.

"He fought them off only up to a point," Banner said aloud. "Then he must have given in . . . and now he's dead."

Tapping his fingers on the journal cover, Banner frowned. It looked as though Rick Jones had found out what was going on in the crater, too—or at least some of the story. And had the creature summoned him to his death?

Banner stood up suddenly, glancing toward the open door of the study. "Oh, are you the housekeeper?" he inquired of the gaunt woman who stood in the doorway. "I'm a friend of Dr. Stern's, and when I found his door open, I . . ."

Her eyes never blinked. They stayed wide and staring. Her mouth hung open. She moved her hand from behind her back. He saw the butcher knife she held.

What was it that guy used to say on the old TV show Rick had watched that summer he was bunking in Greenwich Village? Don’t even remember his name, old movie actor or something.

“What a revolting development this is!”

Yeah, that was it.

It sure applied to this situation.

Rick had awakened about a half-hour ago to find himself bound and gagged—bound and gagged and dumped on a mud floor in somebody’s musty basement.

There was one window. One—count ’em—one. A small little thing, narrow and dusty, allowing only a very small pinch of sunlight in. And that sunlight was soon swallowed by the mildewed darkness down here.

At Rick’s back rose boxes packed with discarded old clothes. Farther away, an ancient red wagon was jammed with broken dolls and toys. Beyond that sat an immense pile of old Sunday funny papers, their faded images celebrating the antics of such forgotten heroes as Barney Google and King of the Royal Mounted.

“Wait a minute,” Rick said to himself. “There’s something you missed.”

Yeah, it sure looked like a toolchest. Only part of it was showing from behind the bundle of brittle comic sections. A tool box ought, by rights, to contain tools—sharp implements you could use to cut your ropes.

The problem was to get there from here. Well, that was the basic problem in life, getting from here to there. Usually, though, you didn’t have the added handicap of having your hands tied behind your back with lots of old clothes line, your feet bound with wire, and your mouth stuffed with an old dust cloth.

“Even so, I’ll have to get to that box of tools.”

He felt somewhat like a private eye as he began to wiggle across the gritty floor on his back. He'd been knocked out twice now by the good people of Crater Falls. That was about his limit. One more time and he was really going to get angry.

Rick was fairly sure that he was in the boardinghouse basement. Whatever it was that had killed Dr. Stern and was controlling most of the people wanted Rick out of the way for a while. For some reason that thing couldn't get directly at him, couldn't even get hold of his mind.

"Well, he acted a bit too late this time around," Rick said and elbowed along, moving slowly closer to his goal, "because I did get at least part of a message through to General Ross."

He was fairly certain Ross would take action. Hell, that's what the general lived for—action.

Rick had a feeling, too—maybe it was only wishful thinking—that Bruce Banner was nearby, that Banner would somehow help him.

Or maybe, God help him, the Hulk.

Seventeen

Banner said, “You’d better not try—”

“You must die!” Mrs. Snell ran at him, knife slashing at the air.

“To be honest, I’d rather not.” Ducking, he gave the desk a shove. It went skidding across the floor, shedding its stone paperweight, a bunch of letters, sheets of manuscript, and a bottle of deep blue ink.

Thumk!

The desk stopped the charging woman, knocking her backward.

Banner moved. Diving across the desk, he grabbed the stunned woman’s wrist and shook the knife from it.

As the weapon hit the floor, she tried to twist out of his grasp. “You must die! You must die!” She scratched at his face, her fingernails raking across his skin.

“Madam, I’m usually a gentle guy, but . . .” Banner delivered a punch to her knobby chin.

Her jaw shut with a clattering click. She sagged, then spilled down to the floor.

“The creature in the Crater has got to be responsible for this,” decided Banner, scowling down at the unconscious assassin. “Obviously he’s got the ability to project his thoughts over a distance, to gain control over people and make them do exactly what he wishes. Now he knows I’m poking around in his—”

“You must die!”

Another one. A young man in his early twenties, wearing a post office clerk’s uniform. He hefted a greasy wrench in his left hand, and there was a look of madness in his eyes.

More noise came from behind the young man, a scuffling. Then more of them came pushing into the room—a half-dozen in the first wave. There were men, women, young, old, armed with sticks, clubs, shovels—any weapon which had been handy when the creature had sent out his urgent commands.

“You must die!”

“Wake up!” suggested Banner, backing away from this small horde of newly minted zombies. “Wake up, you idiots! He’s got you hypnotized!”

No effect.

“You will die! Die!”

All of them chanted in unison, shuffling toward him, reciting the name of their master again and again.

A plump woman in a flowered housedress pushed through the others. There were nearly twenty of them crowding into the small office now. “Kill him! Kill him!” she screamed, her mouth twisted. She carried a metal-base table lamp and was swinging it like an axe. “Kill him!”

“Wake up, all of you!” yelled Banner. “Can’t you see what he’s making you do? Don’t you realize you’re making me . . . *Mad!”*

Blood began to pulse in Banner’s temples, pounding like thunder in a canyon. Banner threw his hands to his head,

doubling over from the pain. His shirt pulled tight against his hunched back, then split clean up the middle. His sleeves swiftly followed suit. The green glowing figure clawed at the tatters, tearing them away.

Then his powerful, broad chest gleaming in the lamplight, the figure stood erect.

He showed them his enormous green fists, shook them defiantly. The Hulk growled at them, as if daring them to draw near.

“Kill him!” The housewife swung her lamp at his green head.

Smack!

It hit against the Hulk’s wide emerald chest, snapped in half, and did absolutely no harm whatsoever.

“Little insects!” taunted the green giant. “Little, puny humans!”

Grunting, amused, he grabbed up the fat woman. He tossed her right into the others, bowling several of them off their feet.

“Hulk will smash you all!” He pivoted, picked up the desk, and threw it into the gaggle of attackers who were still upright. They fell, tangling with each other.

“Stupid insects!” He thumped to the window, then kicked out all the glass with one powerful foot. “Hulk is tired of playing!” He leaped outside.

More of them waited out there.

Ping! Ping!

Some of those out here were more dangerous. A big, wide-shouldered man across the street was firing at him with a rifle. It was Sheriff Anmar.

But the pitiful little bullets didn’t bother the Hulk’s thick green hide.

There were a couple of dozen more zombies surrounding Dr. Stern’s house, all primitively armed, except for the sheriff, all crying out for the Hulk’s death.

There was a roaring sound, the crowd scattered, and an auto jumped onto the sidewalk. It tore through the picket fence and came barreling across the lawn straight for the Hulk.

“Toys can’t hurt Hulk!” The man-brute lowered his massive head and ran to meet the rocketing car.

Kablam!

The entire front of the car split open. Its radiator began gushing steamy water. The windshield fractured and the fat man at the wheel slapped back and forth between the headrest and the shattered glass.

“Not smart!” The Hulk, snorting, picked up the ruined car, and shook it until the fat man came falling out like the last potato chip in the can. Then he flipped the car toward the watching zombies.

Smap!

The carcass of the automobile smacked down in the street, shedding pieces, but not landing on anyone.

The sight of what had happened to the car didn’t bother the rest of them. Or perhaps they weren’t supposed to be bothered. They had been ordered to destroy this intruder, and nothing else mattered.

“Hulk is tired of you!” He charged at them, slapping them aside with his mighty green palms.

He ran on, like some immense crazed football player running for a touchdown with such force and intensity that nothing could halt him.

A few more tried, but all of them got battered from his path.

“Creature tried to hurt Hulk!” the running giant roared. “Now Hulk will hurt him!”

Eighteen

“There’s your blasted plane, parked over there.”

“So I noticed.”

General Thunderbolt Ross was so angry that he was driving his own Jeep, which had come rolling out of their just-arrived transport plane moments earlier.

“Lucky for you Banner didn’t fly it into the side of a mountain.” The Jeep went squealing away from the landing field.

“He’s a competent pilot,” replied Quartermain, who was sharing the fast-moving vehicle with the unhappy Gamma Base general.

“A competent halfwit!” Head hunched in, forehead ribbed with wrinkles, Ross concentrated on gunning the Jeep along the old highway which led to Crater Falls. “He dopes you, masquerades as you, swipes a damned aircraft, fools my whole halfwitted security staff into thinking he’s you out for a midnight jaunt. Phooey! That’s what comes of putting the guy on his honor.”

“Banner’s fond of the Jones boy,” said Quartermain, yawning. “Can’t really blame him for wanting to—”

“What the heck are you yawning for? Didn’t you get enough sleep last night, courtesy of Banner?”

“Must be an aftereffect of the tranquilizers he slipped me, old chap.”

“Some swell agent you are, letting that milksop put one over on you.” The Jeep bumped and swayed and Ross tromped down heavier on the gas pedal. “A great beauty sleep you had, too. Come staggering into my room at dawn to say, ‘What, ho, old bean, I do believe that bally Banner laddie has done a bunk.’ Phooey!”

“See here, old man, I don’t babble like a baboon even when I’ve been drugged. You are misquoting—”

“Misquote my Aunt Tillie!”

After a few silent and bumpy moments, Quartermain ventured to say, “Look on the bright side, old man. You were planning to come to Crater Falls, anyway. So this little excursion isn’t exactly—”

“Maybe I was, maybe I wasn’t,” responded the general. “But it gripes my fanny to let Banner get one up on us.”

“We may learn something valuable in yon small town.”

They had reached the edge of Crater Falls, which presented a picture of calm and quietude on this sunny morning.

“I’ve already learned something. The next time I get hold of Banner, I’m going to hogtie him and keep him in a cage.”

“General, your notions of penology border on the barbarous.”

Ross slammed on the brake pedal, yanked a wadded-up map out of his shirt, and unfurled it. “Find me Chestnut Street on this blasted map.”

“Courtesy of Leiber’s Garage?” remarked the SHIELD agent as he took the map and noticed the name stamped on its front. “What sort of ordinance chart is—”

“It’s all we had in our files on this dimwitted backwash of a town. Now shut up and set us a course.”

“The boardinghouse we seek is to be reached by passing alongside this pastoral square you see before you, my general, and then—”

“You gab too much!” With a snort, Thunderbolt Ross snatched back the map, scowled at it, flung it aside, and started the Jeep bounding along one of Crater Falls’s seemingly placid streets.

“Are you sure Houdini started this way?” Rick said to himself.

He was sprawled next to the battered tool chest, attempting to use a rusty hacksaw blade on the ropes which bound his hands behind him.

It was not one of the easier tasks he’d ever attempted.

Painful, too. So far he felt as if he’d done as much damage to his flesh as he had to the rope. Still, he was making progress, albeit slowly.

After several more minutes of hacking away at his unseen bonds, Rick felt the rope weakening.

“Of course, a little more of this and I’ll be weakening, too, from loss of blood.”

Suspending sawing operations, Rick tugged, striving to break apart what was left of the rope.

No luck.

Back to sawing.

Another few minutes and he tugged again.

Success this time. The rope parted, and he swung his hands around in front of him. Not as much damage as he’d

expected—only a few bloody scratches on his wrists and the backs of his hands.

Using his freed hands, he untaped the cloth which had been corking his mouth. After spitting out dust and lint, he tried out his voice. “Testing, one, two, three.”

No use in hollering for help. Everybody in town was on the enemy side, making for very discouraging odds.

Rick flexed his fingers and massaged them. Then he went to work on his ankles and got the wire unwound and off.

He swayed some when he first stood up. The unsteadiness soon passed, and he was able to walk across the basement floor and climb the wooden stairs.

He had no idea what might be awaiting him upstairs in the boardinghouse. So far the citizens of Crater Falls worked their mischief only after dark, and it was broad daylight now—a few hours beyond breakfast, judging by his stomach.

“Be cautious, anyway,” he warned himself. He reached out for the door knob.

Before he could touch it, the knob began to turn.

Nineteen

It was nearly time.

Freedom was very close; the long imprisonment was about to end. After centuries, he would finally leave the spacecraft which entombed him.

He was waiting now, his mind given over to controlling the townspeople. This was much more difficult by day, since at night their defenses were down. When they slept he could use them with no trouble at all.

There was no avoiding this, however. This new intruder, this Hulk, had to be stopped. Thus, he must risk using the townsfolk in the daylight hours.

They really were almost too fragile for his purposes, but again he had no choice. When he'd first started utilizing them, he hadn't been aware of just how weak they were. Nothing like his own kind, nothing like the dwellers of his own planet. Therefore, he'd made mistakes, working them all night after night. He'd worn out three or four of them the first month, the older ones mostly. But the fools never

suspected; they wrote the deaths off to heart trouble and old age.

Trapped as he had been, he'd learned to control his impatience. He worked out a plan for them, for his slaves. With his probing mind he found out which were the hardiest, and these he put to work four or five nights each week. The weaker he worked only a night or two. All of them, however, had to have nights off; otherwise, they seemed to sicken, and they might become worth nothing at all to him.

Once he'd figured out a sensible schedule for them, the work moved along rapidly. There were no more deaths from overwork, not even much serious illness. They made admirable progress in digging him out of his premature grave.

Keeping all this secret put some strain on him. Controlling the workers was no problem at all. But getting strangers to stay away at night so that no one would accidentally learn what was going on—that required his far-reaching mind to function for long periods at the limits of its capacity.

The Hulk, whoever and whatever he was, had been able to break through the barrier of thought-inflicted pain. His mind couldn't be controlled, nor could the dangerous knowledge he had be erased. He would have to be killed—killed at once, by day, with all the risks that that entailed.

After the Hulk was gone, then everything would move forward. This planet Earth, with its weak-minded populace, would be an easy one to control. Once free of his ruined spacecraft, once he was out of the crater, he would begin his plan of conquest.

That would be good, to have power again, to rule again.

Once, long centuries ago, he had ruled an entire planet. He had ruled wisely and well, no matter what his opponents had claimed. True, he had killed many of his subjects, but

only those who represented a threat. To rule wisely and well, you must destroy all who try to hinder you. A simple enough concept, yet how few creatures truly understood it and were able to act upon it!

His people had learned early, unlike the weak creatures he found himself among now, who were only haltingly starting to move into space, how to travel across the universe. They explored planet after planet, system after system, and studied the most remote of the galaxies.

That sort of thing had bored him. His own planet, his exalted position as absolute ruler, satisfied him completely. Why, then, depart from such a situation to visit less-interesting planets?

Why, indeed.

They had plotted against him, contrived to betray him. Since many of their mental powers were equal to his, they were able to mask their intentions. That night when they had come stealing into his chambers, so many hundreds of years ago, he had truly been surprised.

He had barely had time to flee from his throne and rush to his private spaceport.

A stand against them was impossible. They allowed him to read their thoughts again for a moment so that he might learn how strong the force amassed against him was.

Retreat was the only answer, the only way to save his life. Thus, he went into exile in the wilderness, the infinite wilderness of space.

He went rocketing off in the special craft he’d long had ready for exactly such an emergency.

His travels had been extensive; he rambled through the void in search of a new place to settle, another planet where his power would allow him to rule. Naturally, he missed his own kind, even though they had seen fit to depose him. But

he would settle for reigning over lesser creatures on a lesser planet.

Earth he had not even considered. Yet somehow his ship had malfunctioned and he'd been pulled into an orbit around the insignificant sphere. In struggling to break free, his craft had been further damaged, causing it to go plummeting earthward.

The ship had hurtled to Earth like an enormous meteor, slamming into the ground and burrowing to a depth of several hundred feet. The ground closed over him, leaving him and his space vehicle in the pit of the crater which the ship had dug.

The country around the crater was very different then; there were few people. He had sensed that as he passed off into unconsciousness.

He slept. There, his ship forming a metal cocoon, he remained. Centuries passed, people filled the land, and still he slept. He was in some state of suspended animation, not dead and hardly alive.

Gradually—it had taken centuries—he started to awaken. Perhaps the thoughts of all the people who now lived around his resting place had eventually had an effect on him, as well.

He became fully awake—at last he was fully aware of himself and knew where he was.

And his primary concern was to regain his freedom.

His metabolism was such that he could survive beneath the ground, with little or no nourishment, for many more years. Once awake, though, he didn't want to put up with that.

He must be free. He must once again rule. And on Earth, with his infinitely superior mind and his abilities, such a task would be simple.

He shifted his considerable weight. Very unsatisfying news was coming to him. His slaves had not been able to destroy the Hulk or even subdue him. The creature was on his way to the crater.

He stirred. The time had arrived. He would go out to meet his approaching visitor.

And this time, Sh’mballah would emerge triumphant.

Twenty

“What in blue blazes are you doing here?”

“Just what I was asking myself a while ago, General. Which is why I spent the last couple of hours escaping.”

Pulling the basement door open wider, General Thunderbolt Ross inquired, “Who stashed you in the cellar, Jones?”

“Really don’t know.” Rick crossed the threshold into the boardinghouse hallway. “Morning, Mr. Quartermain.”

The SHIELD agent was leaning, arms folded, against the wall. “You appear to be the sole inhabitant of this establishment at the moment, my boy,” he said. “Any notion why?”

“Well, there are some strange things going on in this town,” began Rick. “That’s why I called you last night.”

“What about your buddy Banner? Where’s he hiding?”

“I didn’t even know Bruce was in town. Where is he?”

“That’s what I’m asking you, Jones.”

“Generalissimo,” put in Quartermain, “what say we control the steamroller effects? Rick, my lad, fill us in on what’s been occurring here in cozy Crater Falls.”

Rick made his way to the stairs, then sat on the second step up. “Could you tell me first why you expect Bruce to be here?”

“Because he broke out of Gamma Base last night to come here and pull your burning chestnuts out of the fire.”

“I didn’t even know he was your guest again, General. Still, I thought your gamma set-up was next to impossible to —”

“Brother Banner used a clever ruse to effect his escape,” interrupted Quartermain. “Now, get on with the details of the situation that prevails.”

Resting on the step, Rick told the calm SHIELD agent and the impatient general all about what had happened since he’d come trudging into town a few days ago.

When he had concluded, Quartermain remarked, “Lord love a duck. Crater Falls is a good deal livelier than one would guess.”

“We’ve got to find out what killed Rudy Stern,” said General Ross. “And we damned well better find out what it is that’s got the citizenry acting like halfwits.”

“It all has to go with the crater,” said Rick. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about this, and—”

“I’d also like to know where that milksop Banner got to.”

Rick stood up. “Bruce would have tried to find me here first, I know,” he said. “Then he’d most likely have gone to Dr. Stern’s to see if he could pick up a clue there.” He glanced around, frowning. “You say nobody’s home here?”

“Nary a soul, my boy.”

“Can’t figure where Linda went. She’s usually—”

“Forget your schoolboy crushes on the local belles,” the general advised. “Come on and hop in the damned Jeep. We’ll see if we can trace Banner.”

People were strewn about, awkwardly.

They were spilled on the lawn, groaning and moaning. They were tumbled in the street, draped over curbstones. Some of them were still on their feet, but wandering in aimless, nowhere circles.

“Three guesses as to who did this,” said General Ross, stopping the Jeep and jumping into the street.

“I note certain telltale signs that friend Hulk may have been in the neighborhood.”

“He never hurts anybody unless they try to hurt him first,” defended Rick.

An old woman in a blue terry-cloth robe wandered by, a wooden meat mallet swinging from one hand. “Kill him . . . kill him,” she burbled before falling over into a hedge.

“Programmed to kill,” observed Quartermain.

“This is odd,” said Rick.

“You bet your candy-striped fanny it’s odd,” said General Ross. “Bunch of halfwitted zombies moping around like—”

“No, I mean the fact they’re out in the daytime.” Rick scanned the doctor’s house and grounds. “My experience has been that whatever it is that controls these people works only at night.”

“Perhaps our unknown villain has added a day shift, my boy.”

“Something’s happened,” said Rick, “to break the pattern.”

“Enough chin music,” growled Thunderbolt Ross as he went marching across the lawn and into the house. The other two followed.

“Your buddy’s been busy inside, too,” said the general from the study. “Threw things around, bruised little old ladies’ fannies, kicked defenseless—”

“I tell you he never harms anyone unless—”

“Rick, save your wind,” said Quartermain. “A man in Ross’s position isn’t obliged to listen to reason.”

Ignoring the three unconscious people decorating the office floor, General Ross stalked over to the broken desk. “The Hulk had a field day with this joint, huh? He must have . . . Ha!”

“Find a clue, old boy?”

The general had found the journal steepled on the rug. He gathered it up and began studying its pages. “Blue blazes!” he commented finally. “Give a listen to this.” He proceeded to read to them all that the late Dr. Stern had written about the crater and his suspicions as to what dwelled in it.

“Very spooky,” said Quartermain when General Ross closed the book. “Explains a great deal, though. We can make a pretty good guess as to what killed Rudy Stern.”

“Yeah, but at the moment I’d rather know where the damned Hulk went.”

“Isn’t that obvious?” Rick asked.

“Apparently not, my lad.”

“He must have headed for the crater,” explained Rick, “to face the creature.”

Twenty-One

Go back!

The words came blazing into his brain.

Go back!

Pain came with the telepathic commands, pain which would have felled an ordinary man, thrown him to the ground to writhe and yowl.

The Hulk, however, was no ordinary man. He ignored the creature’s orders and threats, ignored the pain.

Steadily, doggedly, the green giant slogged through the woods. Impatient with trails and pathways, the Hulk followed a more direct route, one he cut for himself as he thoomed along. Trees toppled; brush was uprooted. A multitude of woodland birds went flurrying up into the midday sky.

You will die!

“Hulk will never die!” he bellowed, slapping a tree out of his way.

The Hulk clumped ahead, cutting a wide swath through the once peaceful forest.

I am powerful! I can destroy you!

“Nobody can destroy Hulk!”

He felt as though he could almost see the creature’s angry words come snarling through the woodland to lodge in his skull.

Turn back!

“Nothing can stop Hulk!”

He was drawing nearer to the crater. The going became more difficult—the creature’s power seemed to grow stronger the closer he got.

Like a weary marathon runner, the Hulk kept lifting one giant foot and putting the other down. He slowed, but kept on moving.

I will destroy you! I will rule the world!

“You will not rule Hulk!”

Perspiration glowed on his chest and back, the beads flashing green in the slants of sunlight.

“Hulk will fight you! Stop you!”

There was the crater, looming ahead—a wide, jagged cone of earth and rock thrusting up above the dead gray land.

You are finished!

“Hulk has not even started yet!”

A hollow drumming was filling the Hulk’s head, his massive bones throbbed with pain, and his emerald skin felt as if it were burning away.

Yet he kept on, fighting up the side of the slanting crater, his footfalls echoing.

All at once the crater shook; wrenching and rumbling sounds came shooting up out of the pit. There was an awesome odor in the air, sulfurous and rank. Huge cracks

were forming in the outer wall, growing, zigzagging, multiplying. Great chunks of earth and rock came spurting up out of the hole. Mud whooshed out, gurgling through the new cracks. A ripping and rending followed.

The Hulk held his mighty green arms out at his sides to help him keep his balance on the bumping, cracking crater's side.

"Earthquake won't hurt Hulk!"

It wasn't a quake; it was Sh'mballah breaking free of his centuries-old prison. The people of the town, working many long hard weeks, had done most of the work, and now the imprisoned being, impelled by the impending approach of the Hulk, had completed it.

The green giant scrambled up to the rim of the pit. It was from there that he got his first look at his foe.

"You can't do that," asserted Rick Jones.

"Can't, my Aunt Tillie!" General Thunderbolt Ross was sitting half inside the parked Jeep, the mike of his radio clutched tightly in his hand. "I've just called in the choppers that came with us this morning."

"But you told them to capture the Hulk and . . . whatever else is out at the crater," said Rick, who stood on the sidewalk, fists clenched in anger. "That's not fair. The Hulk hasn't—"

"This isn't the high-school debating society, sonny boy," the general told him. "I went easy on the Hulk before, but those days are gone forever. I want him caught. And I want that . . . that thing out there caught, too."

"We don't actually, old boy, know what this celebrated entity is," Quartermain, who was perched on the Jeep hood, mentioned. "It might turn out to be the sort of beastie which gobbles up choppers for snacks. Or it could hypnotize the

crews in the same manner in which it's been hoodooing the denizens of this little community."

"We'll just risk that, Mr. Quartermain!"

Shrugging, Quartermain spread his hands wide apart. "Saints preserve us, he's calling me *Mister."* He shook his head at Rick. "There's no reasoning with him once he's in this mood, my boy."

"I'm going out there," said Rick, starting to walk away from them.

"See here, Jones," called General Ross through cupped hands, "I don't want you doing any such thing."

"Nobody's declared martial law in Crater Falls yet," he called back as he kept on walking.

Gracefully, Quartermain swung off the Jeep. "I'd best tag along, Generalissimo, to see to it the lad keeps out of mischief."

"Let the choppers handle the first phase of this."

"Ah, but I believe this job calls for a human touch, sire." He delivered a mock salute, then went jogging off after the young man. "Wait up, my boy."

Twenty-Two

“Ugly!”

The creature was crawling up the inside of the crater, an immense, ungainly thing. It vaguely resembled an octopus, but it was many times larger. Its outer skin was rough and crusted, yet partially transparent. You could see inside the thing, catch glimpses of bloated ribbons of thick, purplish entrails, gross, strange-hued organs. Inside the bulbous portion of body which served as the head, an enormous pink brain floated, knobby black nerves twisting away from it. There were eyes—several of them—all bulging and yellow, clustered above a jagged mouth hole which was packed with a multitude of spiky teeth. The creature propelled itself with multiple tentacles, each of which was encrusted with sucking discs oozing a yellowish viscous fluid. In dragging its vast blob of a body nearer to the rim of the pit, it left trails of amber slime in its wake.

I am Sh’mballah, Emerald One—and you are doomed!

The Hulk planted his green fists on his hips and laughed derisively. “Bah! Hulk is not afraid of big jelly fish!”

Sh’mballah shot out one of his long tentacles and whipped it around the green giant’s leg.

A tremendous electric jolt came shooting into the Hulk’s mammoth body.

I am your master!

Another tentacle writhed in the air, seeking to attach itself to the Hulk.

“No!”

Gritting his teeth, the Hulk sank his huge emerald fingers into the tentacle which sucked at his leg. It was like trying to clutch Jell-O which had been laced with broken glass.

I will own you!

“No!” repeated the green Goliath. He squeezed at the tentacle which held him fast, snarling. “Nobody owns Hulk!”

Another severe electric shock ripped through his leg, causing him to gnash his teeth.

He strained, fingertips digging deep into the tentacle. “Let go of Hulk!”

Sh’mballah’s sudden silent scream of agony knifed through the green giant’s head.

Stumbling back, the Hulk flung the detached tentacle scornfully away from him.

You will die!

The man-brute stood his ground as Sh’mballah came sluicing over the jagged lip of the crater. “Monster, Hulk will tear you apart!”

He was striving to concentrate on the alien being, fighting to prevent it from ruling his mind or destroying his body. But something kept distracting him.

And finally the Hulk risked a glance over his shoulder. Sure enough, a trio of transport helicopters was bobbing through

the sky.

“They want to capture Hulk!”

Before he could decide what to do about the approaching Gamma Base forces, Sh’mballah sent another deadly tentacle coiling at him.

“Don’t be a couple of stubborn halfwits.”

“What say, Ricky, my boy, shall we take him up on his offer?”

“I really don’t think we need him.”

“Climb aboard, climb aboard,” General Thunderbolt Ross urged. He was following them along the dusty little road which led out to the crater. “I decided I’d better come out here to make sure you two clowns don’t foul up.”

Rick pointed skyward. “Isn’t it really because you want to see your choppers destroy the Hulk?”

“Damn it, Jones, I have no intention of knocking off something as valuable as the Hulk!”

“He’s a person, not a piece of military hardware. That’s the whole trouble—”

“Being several days ahead on my exercise, I accept your kind offer,” put in Quartermain.

The Jeep bucked and scattered dust as Ross hit the brakes. “So, get in, already. You, too, Jones.”

Rick waited until the SHIELD agent was settled beside the general before climbing, reluctantly, into the back seat. “You never told me how you captured the Hulk this time.”

All three of them bounced as the Jeep went roaring ahead.

“We came up with something new,” answered General Ross. “Got him good and proper. Then, however, certain bleeding-heart halfwits at Gamma Base got the goofy notion we ought to let him run loose, like some kind of pet lamb in a kiddie zoo.”

“He wasn’t the Hulk by that time, old man,” reminded Quartermain. “You simply can’t treat a scientist of Bruce Banner’s caliber as if he were an ape you’ve bagged in the jungle.”

“Hooey! Banner and the Hulk are one and the same, no matter what that mollycoddle claims,” said Thunderbolt Ross. “I’ll tell you something else, too. I don’t for a minute believe Banner can’t control himself. No, sir, I’m sure he can turn into that green gazoo whenever he wants to. Sure, halfwits like you sit around and cry in your Ovaltine over his pitiful situation. ‘I can’t help myself, poor little me. It’s a terrible curse.’ Hogwash! That kind of malarkey went out with Lon Chaney. We’re going to find out that Banner knows a hell of a lot more about how to—”

“He doesn’t!” said Rick. “You know damned well he got turned into the Hulk because of an accident—an accident that was my fault. You’ve got a hell of a nerve trying to—”

“There’s another thing,” said the general, sneering. “You ought to grow up yourself, sonny boy. Pretending to be responsible for Banner’s troubles is a great excuse for you. ‘Oh, pity me, I can’t hold a job, even one playing an off-key guitar with some unwashed collection of freaks calling themselves a junk-rock group. Woe is me, if only I didn’t have to waste all my time looking after poor Brucie.’ ”

“Shut up!” Rick was standing up in the back seat. “What the hell are you hinting at? Don’t you understand what it means to destroy someone’s life and—”

“Calm and quiet is what is called for, lads.” Quartermain casually reached back and pushed Rick into a sitting position. “Gents, what say we drop the great Hulk debate for the nonce? Let’s turn our thoughts rather to the beastie lurking in Crater Falls. What’s his one and only claim to fame?”

“Muck,” mumbled the general, tightening his grip on the steering wheel.

“And it’s not junk rock, it’s punk rock,” corrected Rick.

“I’ve heard you play, and it’s junk.”

“We really have to achieve some détente around here, chaps.” Quartermain settled in his seat, apparently oblivious to the jolting ride. “I’ve done some mental speculation as to what our resident monster might be, and I have concluded that we may be dealing with a visitor from another planet.”

“Don’t start giving me a flying-saucer mystery on top of everything else,” said General Ross. “I have enough blasted problems to worry about.”

“Review the facts, old man,” continued Quartermain. “We have, according to the facts I’ve been able to amass, one very large hole in the ground. There are craters such as this here and there around this great land of yours. Some were made by the unexpected arrival of meteors many long years ago. Suppose, however, that the crater we are so bumpingly approaching was not made by a meteor at all, but rather by an alien spacecraft.”

“Science fiction,” grumbled the general.

“Come now, old chap. Haven’t you heard the current saw that real life is fast catching up with sci-fi?” said the SHIELD agent. “Very well, then, we have a ship from some other planet burying itself on the outskirts of Crater Falls, hundreds of years ago, perhaps.”

“Sure, and the halfwits in it were so shook up by the landing that they’re just now thinking about getting out.”

“General, we know very little about our neighbors in this infinite universe of ours. It’s possible that the creature or creatures aboard this particular vehicle have the ability to hibernate for long periods of time. They may have worked out some higher form of cryptobiosis. We simply don’t know.”

“All I know,” said General Ross, “is that there’s something strange out here. Maybe it’s from outer space; maybe it’s

just another little surprise Banner cooked up.”

“He’d never—”

“Forget it, Jones.”

The road grew narrower and began winding through the forest.

Frowning, Quartermain said, “This woodland is strangely quiet.”

“We noticed that yesterday,” said Rick. “It must have something to do with—”

Kablam! Bam!

The road immediately in front of them exploded.

Twenty-Three

They distracted him.

Which the Hulk shouldn’t have allowed.

While he was scanning the sky, watching the three large copters whirring toward them, the creature from the pit had an opportunity to coil one of its slimy tentacles around his green torso.

He bellowed as yet another powerful shock went surging through his massive frame.

The Hulk lost his footing, then slipped to one knee. Then he was flying through the air. Sh’mballah had flipped him almost casually away.

The green giant plummeted, dropping toward the bottom of the crater.

Kaslam!

He landed with an earth-shaking jolt, hitting hard against the carcass of the alien spacecraft. For several blurred seconds, he lay spreadeagled on his back.

It was just long enough to give Sh’mballah time to go slithering away into the woods. The creature had sensed he must get away from there, that the crater was not a good place to make a stand against the humans.

It was just long enough to give the military choppers time to lob two gas shells down into the crater.

It was their newest gas, the stuff they’d used to incapacitate the Hulk before.

“You will not gas Hulk!” he told the hovering ships.

But he was having a rough time of it. Before he got to his feet, the gas was already insinuating itself into his lungs. He staggered upright, swaying, reaching out to get a handhold on nothing.

He tumbled to his knees, nearly toppling over.

“Hulk will escape!”

Using his mighty green fingers like scoops, the Hulk clawed at the earth. He managed to pull himself clear of the wreckage of the alien craft.

“Climb! Hulk must climb!” he urged himself. He kept clawing at the dirt, making slow progress up the sloping crater side.

But the crater was breaking up, and he was like a lab animal on a treadmill, scrabbling and scuffling and getting absolutely nowhere.

The gas was everywhere, swirling and spinning around his head, rasping into his nose, scraping across his green lips, and poking down his throat.

The sky above the Hulk was turning into a glaring blue disc, a throbbing disc which never got any closer. He struggled, tearing at the earth.

“Hulk must stop Sh’mballah!”

No one understood that. They were fools, doing this to him—pressing that blue disc down into his face, dumping

the earth on top of him.

His last connection with reality broke. The Hulk slammed forward like a felled tree. Then he went rolling and tumbling down to the bottom of the pit.

“Over in the woods! A blasted ambush party!”

Ping! Ping!

Bullets came whistling out of the woods to smack into the body of their halted Jeep.

The three men scrambled from the vehicle swiftly, putting it between themselves and the rifleman.

“Believe I made out several of them over yonder,” said Quartermain. “More of the locals pressed into the service of our alien beastie.”

“This is a hell of a note,” said the fuming general. “Planting dynamite in the road, taking potshots at us.”

“We’re not wanted at the crater,” said Rick. “That’s obvious.”

Ross suddenly popped up to shout, “You halfwits are messing with the U.S. government!”

Ping!

“Don’t be halfwitted yourself, old man.” Quartermain yanked the angry Thunderbolt Ross back behind the rear of the Jeep. “It’s unlikely friend monster is much in awe of the United States government. The reputations of the Pentagon, the F.B.I., and the I.R.S. haven’t yet reached the farthest stars.”

“Do you have to be a wiseacre even under fire?”

“The best time for it, old man.”

“That’s the sheriff, the one with the rifle,” said Rick after risking a very quick peek around the edge of the sheltering vehicle.

“A complete breakdown of law and order,” sighed Quartermain. “What we need now is a bit of diversion.” He drew his bright revolver from his holster and pressed it into Rick’s hand. “Fire a few shots in the general direction of our amateur guerrillas, my boy, when I give you the signal.”

“What’s the big idea of letting Jones handle a gun?”

“You can shoot off yours, too, my general, if you’d like,” Quartermain invited with a grin. “What we want in the way of fireworks is something to distract the good folks long enough for me to sneak up to them.”

“Risky,” said Ross, tugging out his .45 automatic.

“I am of the opinion that only our mind-warped local constable has a real weapon. From what we’ve seen so far, most of the people simply grab up the handiest thing and improvise. Granted, I may get a nasty wallop with a flatiron or a table lamp, but I’m willing to risk that for the good of the cause.”

“Be simpler if I call in a couple of choppers on the—”

“Now!” said Quartermain.

Rick, who’d already prepared the gun for firing, lifted it up and started slamming shots into the treetops above the huddling, watching ambushers.

Ross followed suit.

And sometime in there, Quartermain seemed to disappear from their midst. One instant he was crouched beside Rick, and the next he was dashing into the woods to be swallowed up by shadows.

“With a little more attention to detail,” said Ross, “we could knock off a few of these rubes from here. That way—”

“General, they’re not responsible. They’ve been hypno—”

“Typical bleeding-heart reaction. ‘Criminals aren’t responsible for their actions; it’s all society’s fault.’ ” Thunderbolt Ross snorted. “Next thing you’ll tell me that this halfwit sheriff comes from a broken home.”

“Don’t you pay attention to anything?” Rick sent a few more shots into the treetops. “You read Dr. Stern’s damned diary. This whole town’s in the grip of some—”

“Yeah, or it could be that Dr. Stern was in the grip of too much booze,” said the general, his eyes narrowed on the ambushers, who waited some hundred yards away. “Lot of these long-haired scientist types are screwy to begin with. Take Banner, there’s a perfect case of—”

“Dr. Stern wasn’t long-haired; he was bald,” said Rick.

“He had a long-haired mind. Another thing—”

“And Bruce Banner happens to be one of the most respected scientists in the whole damned country. You yourself—”

“Respected by other long-haired, halfwitted scientists. That doesn’t mean much.”

“It must mean something to you, General. You’re spending a hell of a lot of time and money to capture Bruce.”

General Ross didn’t reply immediately. “It’s the Hulk I want,” he said finally. “You can’t have a creature like that running around loose. He’s worse than Jack the Ripper and Typhoid Mary rolled into one. No telling the devastation he —”

“You know, if you’d treated him differently from the start . . . well, maybe none of this would have happened.”

“You’re damned right, sonny boy. What we should have done was dump that green goon in the toughest cage we could build and keep him there. Even when he turned into sweet, polite Bruce Banner, keep ’im in the cage. That’s what we should have done.”

“That’s not exactly what I’m suggesting,” said Rick, anxiously surveying the woods for some sign of Quartermain. “I think the Hulk is potentially a tremendous force for good and—”

“He’s got a tremendous force, all right. And if we don’t keep him under lock and key, he’ll use it to destroy the whole damned country!”

“Hell, there’s no use . . . wait a sec!”

Noise was coming out of the forest, from the spot where the ambushers were lurking. Shouting, scuffling, a shot.

Rick took a chance and stood up.

Up ahead Quartermain stepped out onto the roadway. “Tally-ho!” he shouted, Waving his arms. “Sighted sheriff, sank same.”

Gingerly, Ross exposed his person from behind the Jeep. “You’ve got all those characters under control?”

“Were only four of them, old man,” said Quartermain. “With the element of surprise on my side, it wasn’t difficult to subdue the lot and get them moderately trussed up. Now let us—”

“Look out!” shouted General Ross.

A girl came crashing out of the woods behind the SHIELD agent. Her auburn hair streaming behind her, she charged at his back with a hunting knife gripped in her hand.

“It’s Linda!” realized Rick.

“I’ll stop her!” Thunderbolt Ross swung up his automatic and aimed it squarely at the girl’s lovely chest.

Twenty-Four

“No!”

Rick leaped up and slapped the general’s arm.

Bam!

The gun went off, but the bullet dug harmlessly into the road.

“Alley oop!”

Quartermain had, meanwhile, become aware of Linda’s attempts to knife him. He dropped to one knee, pivoted, caught her arm, and sent her flying over his head. She landed in the dusty roadway in front of him.

Getting to his feet, Quartermain tossed away the knife he’d extracted from the girl’s hand while she was sailing over him. “Now, Miss, I do hope you can be persuaded to make no further—”

“Kill! Kill!” Linda got to her feet, lunging for the SHIELD agent.

“Damn it, Jones! I could have winged her if you hadn’t—”

“You could have killed her, you idiot!”

“Be careful who you call an idiot, you halfwitted—”

“Easy now, girl.” Up ahead, Quartermain was struggling with the possessed Linda.

The girl raked her fingernails across his face, cursing him. Then all at once, she slumped in his grip, her head lolling against his chest. “I don’t . . . understand . . .”

Taking her by the shoulders, Quartermain held her out in front of him, eyeing her. “Looks to me, my girl, as if you’re coming out of it, though I’m blessed if I know why.”

She shook her head from side to side, auburn hair brushing her slim shoulders. “How did I . . . what’s been going on?”

“Linda, it’s okay. I’ll explain.” Rick ran up to them and took hold of the girl’s arm.

She blinked, gazing around her. “I feel . . . as if I’ve been sleepwalking . . . or something.”

“Well, that’s exactly what has been going on,” said Rick. “It’s a sort of complicated thing to explain to you.”

She moved a few steps away from the SHIELD agent. “And who’s this gentleman, and why . . . I have a vague notion I tried to hurt him.”

“No real harm done, sweet lady,” Quartermain assured her.

“Are we going to play hearts and flowers on our confounded kazoos all day?” General Thunderbolt Ross wanted to know. “I want to get back to the job at hand.”

“General, this is all part of our task,” said Quartermain. “These good people, after all, are victims of this alien creature.”

Lips near Rick’s ear, the girl asked, “Rick, please, can you tell me something about what’s going on?”

Maybe it was immature on his part and betrayed a lack of perspective, but he enjoyed the closeness of the girl’s lips to

his skin. For a few seconds he thought only about that, completely forgetting the cosmic problem they faced. “Well, Linda, we think there’s some kind of alien entity out in the crater,” he told her. “The thing, whatever it is, has the ability to control the minds of a lot of the people here—including you, I guess.”

Very slowly, she nodded her head. “That makes sense. Somehow I feel it does,” she said. “Lately I’ve had all sorts of very strange dreams . . . but they weren’t all dreams, were they?”

“No. This thing’s been using you.”

“And today . . . what? It tried to make me kill your friend?”

“Doesn’t want us near the crater for some reason.” He pointed a thumb at the damage done to the road by the recent explosion. “Had the sheriff and some others lay a trap for us. Kept you in reserve to finish off any survivors. Fortunately, it didn’t work exactly as planned.”

She shivered, hugged herself. “It’s terrrible, Rick. I feel as if I’ve been . . . I don’t know . . . assaulted.”

“Yeah, I know.” For a moment he put a comforting arm around her. “Hopefully, we’ll be able to—”

“What in the world does this mean?” His leathery hand serving as a sun visor, General Thunderbolt Ross was squinting into the sky.

One of his helicopters was visible, heading back in their direction.

“Mayhap,” suggested Quartermain, “our chum, the Hulk, is about to pay us a visit.”

“Why only one chopper, then?” said Ross. “I don’t like it.” Scowling, fists at his side, he stomped back to the Jeep.

His hand was reaching for his radio mike when Quartermain shouted, “Something’s wrong with it!”

The general spun in time to see the copter come wobbling down through the sky. It fell into the woods out of view. Then

came the sound of a terrible exploding crash.

“We mean you no harm, Dr. Banner.”

“Doctor, are you well enough to—”

“Sure, I’m fine. I’m just in dandy shape.” Banner dug his elbows into the dirt and shoved himself into a sitting position. “Where’s the general?”

“To the best of our knowledge, sir,” said one of the two clean-cut young lieutenants who’d come down into the crater to fetch him, “General Ross is still in Crater Falls directing the overall operation.”

Knocking aside the proffered helping hand, Banner got to his feet unaided. “What about Sh’mballah?”

“Who?”

“That creature, that thing that broke out of this damned pit.”

The other lieutenant said, “Holy smoke! That was the weirdest-looking thing I’ve ever—”

“Our orders, Dr. Banner, were to give top priority to the capture of the Hulk.”

“So you just let that . . . whatever it was . . . go shambling away?”

“One of our copters is keeping it under surveillance, Dr. Banner.”

“A lot of good that’ll do.”

“How the heck would you overcome that thing?” asked the more exuberant of his two captors.

“I’m not at all sure.”

“The gas we used to subdue you, sir,” explained the more sober lieutenant, “had no effect on the—”

“You didn’t subdue me,” said Banner angrily. “You subdued the Hulk.”

“Whatever you say, sir. All I know is, we knocked out the Hulk after he fell into this hole. When we came down to gather him up, we found you, instead.”

“Makes the hauling operation easier,” said the other lieutenant. “Boy, that Hulk must weigh a ton. How exactly do you work the trick, Doctor, turning from that—”

“You say you tried gassing Sh’mballah?” Banner asked.

“Yes, sir, when we saw him running . . . or, well, that’s not exactly what he does . . . when we decided he was withdrawing from this pit, we used the gas. It had no effect on this . . . Sh’mballah.”

“How’d you find out his name? I mean, does be talk?”

“Well, he didn’t tip his hat and say, ‘Howdy, I’m Sh’mballah, from outer space!’—if that’s what you mean,” said Banner. He started the long climb out of the Crater. “This creature has the ability to project his thoughts, to control people. He got the people of Crater Falls to troop out here and unearth him. Not sure how long he’s been buried here, but what you see down below there is the hull of a spaceship.”

“Holy smoke! A flying saucer!”

The two uniformed young men followed Banner up the wall of the pit.

“Can you contact Thunderbolt Ross?” asked Banner when they were near the rim.

“We’ve been instructed to communicate with General Ross as soon as—”

“Lieutenant Alch!” Yet another clean-cut, uniformed young man came running from one of the helicopters as they emerged from the crater.

“What is it?”

“The copter that went after that . . . thing—it’s down.”

“We’d better get on its tail ourselves,” Alch said. “But first radio General Ross.”

“Can’t.”

“Can’t?”

“Already tried. His radio isn’t working for some reason.”

“Which way,” asked Banner, “was that monster heading?”

Lieutenant Alch pointed. “In that direction, sir, back toward Crater Falls.”

Without another word, Banner started running, heading for the woods and the town beyond.

“Stop, Dr. Banner!” called Lieutenant Alch. “Stop or we’ll use force!”

“I thought we were only supposed to use force on the Hulk.”

“He *is* the Hulk.”

“Not exactly, not at the moment,” said the other lieutenant. “It’s sort of complicated. If we gas him, we haven’t actually gassed the Hulk, and yet, if we—”

“Banner can’t get far on foot,” Lieutenant Alch decided. “Let’s take off and see what happened to that chopper.”

While that discussion went on, Banner kept running.

Twenty-Five

For now, Sh’mballah had released all of his slaves. It was a much greater strain to control them during their waking hours, and he wanted to concentrate on defending himself against his new enemies.

Using his tentacles and the pods on his underside, he went thrashing and undulating swiftly through the forest.

A dull countryside, as dull as its miserable little people. Such pitiful trees, so monotonous in their coloration. Where were the rich blues and crimsons, the pulsing yellows and purples of his homeland? And these pathetic things hardly attained any height at all.

Look what passed for grass on this planet—uninteresting stuff of a sickly green shade. Ah, to move again over the lush golden sward of his homeland, that would be something.

But what was the use of such sentimental lamenting? All the time he’d spent probing the minds of these simple Earth people had planted an unhealthy strain in him. There was

no need to regret his lost home. There was no returning; he was an exile forever. This Earth, as dull and drab as it was, this planet would be his home now . . . more than his home—his domain, his kingdom.

He'd make his first stand against them from their own town. Ensconced in one of their sturdier buildings, he'd destroy the dangerous ones and take over the rest. Moving from the town as a base, Sh'mballah would take over another town and then another. Before they had time to mount any serious attack against him, he'd control too many of them.

Something above him. His mind warned him before his upper eye saw the helicopter.

A primitive flying machine, yet possibly capable of doing him some harm. Best thing to do was get rid of it.

Hear me!

He sent a thought zinging up to the brain of the pathetic creature piloting the helicopter.

I am your master!

A faint garble of thoughts came drifting back down to him, enough to let him know he had the pilot in his thrall.

You will crash your aircraft!

Some hesitation, some faint instinct of self-preservation, a touch of loyalty.

I am your master! I command you to crash!

There! Good!

The helicopter came stumbling down out of the sky to smash and explode in the nearby woodland.

Satisfaction rippled through Sh'mballah's immense body.

It would all go this way; it would be incredibly simple.

Something up ahead. Another challenge.

He left the forest and found himself on a road. A quarter of a mile ahead were several more people, and a land vehicle.

Some of these had been his slaves; others were part of the new threat. And one was the youth he hadn’t been able to use. Now and then you found one like that, where the mental rule was impossible. Fortunately, there were few of those.

They saw him now. He sensed fear and repulsion. Hate, dread.

That was to be expected. To rule, however, you didn’t need subjects who loved you. All you needed were subjects.

A female with hair the color of pale flame was screaming, pointing at him. And a man, large for one of these humans, was aiming a weapon at him.

Sh’mballah came as close to being amused as one of his kind could. The pathetic pellet from the gun hit his outer skin and flattened, falling to the dust of the road.

He rolled on toward them.

The youth was forcing the girl into the wood, to hide.

Sh’mballah snapped out a tentacle or two and smacked the youth across the head. Even though he couldn’t control his mind, he could hurt him with his other powers. He sent a strong electric shock into the boy.

Then he threw him against the bole of a tree.

The girl next. Shock and throw.

What was this?

Another of them was trying something different. Going to drive that tiny little machine into him.

Pathetic.

Sh’mballah waited until it was close enough, then whipped it from his path, driver and all.

Kabam!

It made a very satisfying sound as it smashed into the trees.

Sh’mballah continued on his way.

Banner found Rick Jones first.

The young man was lying at the edge of the road, on his back, dirt and blood smearing his face.

“Rick!” Banner knelt beside him.

The boy’s eyes opened. “Christ, he . . . where’s Linda?”

“Not sure,” said Banner, examining his friend. “Mostly bruises and bumps—nothing too serious.”

“That thing,” said Rick as Banner helped him to sit up, “it just grabbed us and . . . it was like being grabbed by a high-voltage cable.” Wincing, he looked around him. “He got Linda, too.”

From the nearby brush came a low moan.

“Stay here,” ordered Banner. “She may be just over there.”

It was the auburn-haired girl, lying like a discarded rag doll. There was an ugly chain of puckered red welts glaring along one bare arm.

“Doesn’t look like anything’s broken,” observed Banner, kneeling beside the awakening girl. “Linda, how do you feel?”

“Strange,” she said. “That creature . . . did he hurt Rick?”

“Not too badly.” He eased an arm around her, got her to her feet. “That arm’s going to have to be treated. Trouble is, I have a hunch Crater Falls is going to have other things on its mind for a while.”

“That’s where it was going . . . to our town,” she said, brushing her hair away from her face. She saw her arm then and gasped. “My Lord, that’s where it touched me!”

“Fancy meeting you here, old chap.” Quartermain was with Rick when Banner and the girl reached the roadway again. The SHIELD agent, except for some rips in his jumpsuit, was in excellent shape. “Good thing I’m noted for my dexterity. That blobby bloke flipped me into a tree,

relatively high up. Took a bit of apeman technique to get to the ground.”

“What a damned fine mess this is.” Farther along the road General Thunderbolt Ross was standing, scowling at his overturned Jeep. One of his arms hung limply at his side.

“That arm is bleeding badly, old man,” said Quartermain as he approached the general.

“Just lucky I didn’t break the damned thing.” Snorting, he kicked at one of the Jeep’s tires.

Bloom!

The tire blew out.

“Halfwitted tire!” He turned to scowl at Banner. “What in blue blazes was that thing you let loose?”

“I’m not certain what it is,” said Banner. “And I had nothing to do with releasing it, General. My thought is, the townspeople were recruited to dig him out of the crater.”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Linda. “That’s what all my dreams mean. Except they weren’t dreams—we really were coming out to that pit. It’s awful.”

“Stiff upper lip to one side, General, we better get you to a hospital. An injured arm is—”

“There’re more important things to do.” He moved his scowling countenance closer to Banner’s. “Where’s this glob friend of yours going next, Banner?”

“Crater Falls, I’d guess.”

“Then I better send a flock of planes in to—”

“Not going to be that simple,” said Banner. “He just knocked one of your choppers out of the air. I passed the wreckage on my way here.”

“Yeah, we saw it go down. What about my crew?”

“All dead.” Banner shook his head. “Ship exploded and burned when it hit.”

“Damn!”

“Our transportation problem is solved,” said Quartermain, pointing skyward.

Another of the helicopters was circling overhead, dropping closer to the ground.

“Good. We’ll go into Crater Falls and settle this monster’s hash,” said Thunderbolt Ross.

“Not going to be that simple,” repeated Banner.

Twenty-Six

“There! It’s over there in the church!”

There were people lying in the bright afternoon street, a dozen of them, smashed and broken.

The helicopter had set down in the town square.

Rick noticed that the squirrel-feeding man was there, hiding behind his usual bench, quaking with fear. Only a few days ago, Rick, guitar over his back, had come wandering into town. It felt like a long time ago.

Hopping from the copter, Banner said, “Rick, see if you can get somebody to look after Linda.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Careful, Bruce, that thing’ll—”

“Look after her.”

“Banner,” warned the general as he got himself to the grassy ground, “you’re officially in the custody of the U.S.—”

“Nope, I’m on my own for the duration of this business.” He left them, running toward the town’s white wooden

church.

“I’d fancy one more peek at that beastie.” Quartermain went loping after him.

Spang!

Shards of stained glass exploded out into the street as one of the church’s windows shattered.

“He shouldn’t do that,” said Banner.

“Chap may be an atheist, old man,” said Quartermain. “Never know with these foreign blokes.”

“He’s wrecking the place . . . he’s killing people . . . Hulk must stop him!”

“Good gravy!” exclaimed Quartermain, slowing, then stopping.

Banner had made another transformation. In his place was the Hulk, the green mammoth, muscles bulging, teeth gnashing. “You knocked Hulk down once! No more.”

“Wisely, I think I’ll sit this one out.” Quartermain backed off to watch.

The green giant went bounding up the stone steps of the venerable church.

Stay away!

“You do not scare Hulk!”

I’ll do worse this time! I can defeat you!

“Not this time! No!”

The Hulk barged into the church, pushing through the polished oaken doors.

Sh’mballah had taken over the interior of the place. His immense body filled the aisle and spilled over into the pews. He had sensed that the people would be reluctant to destroy this sacred building. But he hadn’t anticipated the Hulk’s return.

It’s too late! I intend to rule!

“You won’t rule anybody! Hulk will smash you now!”

The big green man ran full tilt at the crater creature. He dodged the whipping tentacles and dug his fingers into the pulpy flesh near the head.

Thrashing, broadcasting pain into his green opponent, Sh'mballah slithered backward.

Karash!

The altar railing was broken and splintered.

"Hulk will smash!"

The green giant tore a chunk of flesh off the monster; a greenish-yellow fluid spurted out.

Sh'mballah got a tentacle hold on the green Goliath and sent an electric shock jolting into him. At the same time he succeeded in flipping the Hulk into the air.

But the Hulk had a death grip on the tentacle and the whole quivering thing ripped free of the creature's body.

The Hulk landed against the altar itself, knocking over the golden candlesticks and setting the crisp white altar cloth afire.

Snarling, he flung aside the useless tentacle and charged at Sh'mballah.

"You are not a ruler! Hulk can beat you!"

The Hulk was unlike any of the other humans Sh'mballah had encountered. He kept trying to take over the green man's mind, but to no avail.

I am your master!

"Nobody is Hulk's master!"

He planted his huge green feet wide apart, grabbed at the monster, and took hold of its pulpy backside. Grunting, straining, he swung it into the air and sent it sailing smack into the altar.

The jewel-encrusted gold crucifix fell from the wall and spiked into Sh'mballah's hide.

The creature’s silent scream of pain resounded inside the Hulk’s head. He put his green paws to his ears, but the scream went right on.

Flailing with its tentacles, the creature rumbled back away from him. It hit the church wall with all its enormous weight. A multitude of stained-glass particles cascaded up into the air as the wall smashed down into the street outside. The afternoon sunlight made kaleidoscopes out of the falling pieces.

“Hulk is not through!”

Slapping people aside with its tentacles, Sh’mballah undulated in the direction of the concrete town hall. That might be a better place to hold off the rampaging Hulk.

But the impatient green giant would have none of that. Howling, he stomped after Sh’mballah. He bent, dealt a sidehand blow to the street, and produced a huge crack. Bending, eyes narrowed and watching the retreating creature, the Hulk tore up a chunk of paving sufficient to floor a private tennis court. This he sent, like an ogre’s frisbee, sailing after the shambling monster.

Kerplop!

The weighty hunk of paving landed squarely on the creature’s back, momentarily making a sandwich out of him.

The Hulk lumbered after Sh’mballah.

I’ll destroy you!

The threats, the promises of death were still coming. But they were weaker now.

The two creatures were opposite Leiber’s Garage when the Hulk caught up with Sh’mballah again.

Sh’mballah shook the section of road from his back. It whacked into the Hulk and sent him staggering backward.

“Now Hulk is really angry!”

He hit the piece of paving with one green fist, shattering it into jigsaw pieces, then charged after Sh’mballah.

The force of his charge sent the creature tumbling into the garage yard, right against the gas pumps. They broke, and gasoline began geysering up into the air.

Sh’mballah managed to wrap a tentacle around the green giant’s broad back. The suction discs shot pain into the Hulk. Howling, he jabbed his emerald forefingers into two of Sh’mballah’s three eyes.

Tangled with each other, the two antagonists smashed into the door of the brick garage building. It fell apart like a toy.

One of the planks struck a piece of metal and there was a spark.

Wham! Blam!

A prince of an explosion, rocking the earth like a high-magnitude quake. Blowing the windows out of every building on the block, snapping the bystanders off their feet two blocks away. And bringing the entire garage, wood and brick and all, down around the two strugglers.

Then the fire spread, licking across the garage grounds and attacking the ruins of the building itself, eating at it, charring it black, turning it into a pyre.

“We’ve got to get him out of there!” Rick went running along the ruined street toward the blazing garage.

“Lad, we don’t need any more suicide missions.” Quartermain grabbed him with both arms.

Rick struggled. “He’ll die in there!”

“That may well be, my boy, but . . .”

He let go then, doubled up with pain.

So did Rick. So did everyone else within a mile.

Sh’mballah was dying. His final telepathic screams of pain were intense, ripping into everyone.

The pain reached an incredible peak. Rick bit into his lip. Quartermain shivered, his teeth chattering.

Then it was over and Sh'mballah was dead, burned away.

Only the terrible memory of his final cries remained, but that was more than enough to last them all a lifetime.

"Hulk is hot." The great green behemoth came lumbering clumsily out of the fire, his emerald skin stained black with soot, his brutish face a mask of confusion and annoyance.

Rick wanted very much to run to the giant's side, to embrace his monstrous friend, but he knew better than to try. He had lived in the shadow of the Hulk long enough to know what must happen next.

The Hulk's muscular arms stretched heavenward, thick veins lining the emerald flesh like a road map. His bestial face contorted in anger.

"No! Not Again! Do not let it happen to Hulk again! Hulk does not want to change! Hulk hates puny Banner! Hulk is . . . Hulk is . . ."

The man-brute's voice trailed off as he stumbled forward. His jade eyes, which a moment before had blazed with primitive fury, were now soft, fragile, almost pathetic.

Each step he took was less certain than the last, less steady. The Hulk stretched a wavering hand out toward Rick Jones, his emerald lips moving as if imploring the youth to help him.

Then the Hulk keeled over, sprawling awkwardly to the sidewalk.

By the time Rick Jones and Clay Quartermain reached him, it was the frail Bruce Banner who lay unconscious at their feet.

Twenty-Seven

Silence swallowed the night. Not even the drone of crickets disturbed the utter stillness. No one spoke, no one dared to.

There was a clamminess in the air, like the hour before a summer storm. Sensing the unnatural stillness, Rick Jones craned his head in every direction, hoping to discover the cause. There wasn’t even a breeze.

Yet something was moving. Something was heading their way. Quartermain sensed it as well, though all he could discern was a faint mist rolling in ominously from the distant plain.

General Ross swallowed hard. He felt strangely uneasy, the kind of uneasiness he’d felt only once before—back in 1945, on an airdrop into Berlin—on a mission that had come precariously close to ending his life.

Rick knelt by the prostrate form of Bruce Banner, who moaned softly as his eyes fluttered open. He was struggling to recognize the concerned faces which peered down at

him. Rick . . . ? Ross . . . ? Quartermain . . . ? What in hell was going on around here?

“Something’s wrong, Quartermain—something’s damned wrong. I can feel it in my bones.” Ross spat out the stub of his cigar, then lit another.

“So tell me something I don’t know, General. The air around here is so thick that you could have it carpeted.” Quartermain suppressed the beginning of a smile—not exactly the time to feign high spirits, he decided.

“Rick . . . what’s happened? Wh-where am I? It’s so hard for me to remember.” Banner strained to shake the cobwebs from his head.

“Your big green alter-ego just went fifteen rounds with a certain shambling mound of putrescent Jell-O called Sh’mballah. The Hulk took the match on a TKO—but I’m not completely sure it’s over yet.

“You okay, Doc?” Rick Was concerned.

Banner cradled the back of his head with his right hand and grimaced. “I’ll be nursing a lump the size of a small elephant for the next few months . . . but I think I’ll live.” The edge was off that last word. Banner hadn’t truly *lived* in years . . .

. . . not since that damned gamma bomb catastrophe.

His legs creaked as he rose, but he worked out the kinks as he stood beside Linda. “You saw? You know?” Banner asked her.

Linda nodded. “Uh-huh. And the amazing part of it is—it doesn’t really bother me. So there’s something big and green and monstrous inside you. God help us, but I think there’s probably a little of the Hulk in everyone.

“Maybe you’re the lucky one, Bruce . . . you can set that demon free now and again. You can face your emotions and deal with them.”

“If you call devastating large portions of this country dealing with my emotions, you’re right. But that doesn’t make it any easier.” There was a quality in Linda that Banner appreciated. He deeply wished he could take the time to know her better. But so long as the Hulk still shared his life, he did not dare to share his life with anyone else.

The one thing Bruce Banner feared more than anything else was accidentally causing harm to someone he loved. No, until the day the angry voice of the Hulk could be stilled forever, Bruce Banner would have to walk alone.

“Thunderation! Look! Look there, at the edge of town!” Ross was jabbing a blunt finger toward a small speck off in the distance. “You see it? It’s a man, I think—coming this way!”

Ross turned as Linda gasped. “There’s nothing in that direction except the falls . . . nothing but the *falls!”*

Banner grasped Linda by the upper arms. “That’s not all, is it? I can hear it in your voice. What is it, Linda? Tell us!”

“No. You . . . you’d think I was crazy. I mean, he’s too far off for me to see clearly. But his walk, the way he holds his head. It just can’t be who I think it is.” Her voice softened to a cold whisper. “Can it?”

“It can’t be *who,* damn it?” Ross almost bit through his cigar in his fury. “Is everything in this halfwit town a puzzle? If you’ve got something to say, sister—spit it out!”

There were shadows around Linda’s eyes now, as if she’d suddenly aged five years. “Look at the way he walks, that slight limp. I know that limp. After all, I worked with the man for five years. It isn’t possible, but that can only be Rudolf Stern—the *late* Rudolf Stern. Now you can tell me I’m crazy.

“Please . . . tell me I’m crazy.”

The distant figure had ambled closer now, and those who stood watching could now see the emerald glow which

surrounded him, a glow almost as green as the flesh of the monstrous Hulk.

Ross stood there impatiently, with fully two inches of ash on the end of his cigar. Quartermain squinted, hoping to get a better view of the approaching figure, then remembered the binoculars slung around his neck.

He put them to his eyes, focused, and his breath caught in his throat. “Fair lady, you’ve got sharper eyes than a nest full of eagles. That *is* Stern—and he’s coming straight toward us!” Linda choked audibly.

Ross reached for his radio. “We need help over here—and we need it now! No, I haven’t got time to explain right now, damn it. You’ll do what I tell you, Mister, because I’m a general and you’re not. That enough reason for you? Then move it!”

Several hurried strides brought the general to Banner’s side. “Look, I know we’ve never gotten along, Banner—and I don’t intend to apologize for it—but something tells me that if this two-bit town is ever going to see another sunrise, you and I are going to have to work together.”

Banner shook his head in confusion. “I appreciate the overture, General, but I don’t know what you’re talking about. So what if it *is* Stern? Obviously, he isn’t dead. It’s possible he was merely unconscious when Rick saw him in the woods.”

“Believe me, Bruce, he wasn’t. I know a dead man when I see one—and Stern was about as dead as they come!” Rick’s voice was almost shrill as he shouted.

“Rick, you simply didn’t know Dr. Stern as well as I did. The man was an epileptic. He must have been suffering a seizure when you saw him.”

Rick was astonished. “Epilepsy? I—I never knew.”

“Nobody knew—except me. Stern believed gamma radiation, working in conjunction with various other forms of

radiation, might be able to prevent epilepsy if discovered early. That's why he was always so fanatical about the subject and why, when Gamma Base seemed to drop most other research to concentrate solely on capturing the Hulk . . ."—Banner glanced meaningfully at Ross, who merely snorted contemptuously in reply—". . . well, that's when he finally decided to leave and continue his research up here.

"Look, I'm not saying that's how Stern's supposed death actually happened, but it's certainly a logical assumption, isn't it? Rudolf Stern is walking, isn't he? And dead men don't walk!"

The figure was closer now, easily seen. It was definitely Rudy Stern, walking almost too slowly toward them, the green glow surrounding him like the aura around a full moon.

Stern's eyes were dead white; no pupil could be distinguished, even through Quartermain's binoculars. His face was like powdered chalk, his lips unmoving. He walked a straight line unerringly through the center of town, toward the ruined garage and Ross's party.

"All right Stern, just hold it right where you are. We've got a few questions that need answering here," Ross snarled at the aging doctor. But his expression turned to one of shock as Stern began to speak, with a voice that came from nowhere and everywhere all at the same time.

The voice was unearthly, inhuman. And it was a voice they all had heard before—the voice of Sh'mballah, the stalker from the stars.

I have not died, fools! That which is eternal can never die!

Stern stood unmoving, his head cocked slightly to the side, giving him a bizarre, outré appearance. It was then that Banner realized what Stern most resembled. He looked like a cadaver at a medical school, hanging limply from a hook.

My body has perished; I can no longer return to my home. I have lost my final battle, but I will not lose the war. This host body is completely under my control, and its gamma-radiation level increases with every passing second. Soon it will attain critical mass, and then—

Banner completed the sentence. "—You'll become a working *gamma bomb,* like the one that affected me!"

The living intelligence that is Sh'mballah will perish, but you will all die with me. Sh'mballah shall have his revenge!

Banner stared in mute horror at what remained of the man he had all but worshipped during his days as an apprentice physicist, a man whose keen insights had inspired Banner into making discovery after discovery. Now Rudolf Stern was no more than a mindless marionette, its strings controlled by a ruthless creature from another world.

Banner felt helpless and, worse, useless.

"Get over here, Banner—behind the lines. You're a civilian, damn it!" Ross's order echoed through the night, momentarily breaking the silence.

"You're not my boss, Ross. You can't order me around like one of your flunkies." Banner was getting angry now, and he hated that damned emotion. Hated it because a scientist is supposed to be calm and collected at all times. Hated it because it interfered with a logical approach to research.

But, most of all, he hated anger because it robbed him of his most valuable possession—it stole away his humanity.

"No, not now, not again." Banner's eyes began to glow green as his voice deepened to a growl. "Keep back. Keep away from me. I can't control it, can't be responsible for what happens." The words came harder now as his mind began to muddle.

Rick Jones bolted from the crowd. He grabbed Banner even as the scientist doubled over in pain. "Doc, listen to me. You've got to control yourself. Don't give in to it. Don't!"

But it was already far too late, and Rick Jones knew it. He stepped away from his friend as Banner’s back began to broaden, growing wider and wider, until a massive emerald figure seemed to fill the shattered street.

His legs had grown thick and powerful, and his dusky brown hair shimmered green in the moonlight.

Linda Connelly stepped back in horror. It was one thing to see a wounded behemoth become a helpless man, but to witness the opposite transformation, that of man to monster, was another thing entirely.

Bruce Banner no longer existed now.

In his place stood a snarling, savage creature known only as the Hulk!

Twenty-Eight

“Soldiers! Ross! Hulk hates puny soldiers! And Hulk hates Ross more! Why do puny soldiers always bother Hulk? Why won’t they leave Hulk alone? Why? *Why??”* The man-brute’s growling voice thundered through the darkness, his emerald eyes blazing with anger.

With one incredible leap, he stood at Ross’s side, and a moment later he held the general aloft in one powerful hand. “Ross has always tried to hurt Hulk with puny guns! But now Hulk will hurt Ross! Now Hulk will smash!”

Ross was genuinely frightened. Never before had he felt the monster’s rage this closely. He stared deep into the jade giant’s smoldering eyes, trying desperately to find some trace of Bruce Banner there. He found nothing. At the moment, Banner simply did not exist.

What that meant to Ross was this—he was a helpless captive of a raging madman who possessed the power to snap the general’s spine like a twig, without the slightest forethought or the slightest regret.

“Hulk, don’t! You mustn’t hurt him. He isn’t trying to hurt you.” The voice came from behind the Hulk, soft, compelling. The man-brute turned to see Linda stepping toward him. “Please, don’t hurt him, Hulk. He means you no harm.”

“Bah! Ross hates Hulk. And Hulk hates Ross. Ross tries to kill Hulk with guns and bigger guns. Ross wants Hulk dead.”

“No, Hulk, that isn’t true. The general wants to help you, not hurt you. Please—you’ve got to believe me.” Linda laid a slender hand on the Hulk’s massive arm, urging him to put Ross down. The behemoth’s arm did not move. He stared curiously at the small figure before him. Women never bothered Hulk, only the puny soldiers and their annoying guns.

Then his hooded eyes shifted once more to the frightened figure of Thunderbolt Ross, still squirming in his powerful grasp. “No! You try to confuse Hulk! But Hulk won’t let you do that! Hulk will smash you all!”

There is no time for senseless battle, monster. You shall die even as I die.

The telepathic voice cut through the confusion and brought them all back to jarring reality. The awkward figure of Rudy Stern still stood before them, the emerald glow much brighter now.

You destroyed Sh’mballah’s body, monster. Now Sh’mballah will destroy you.

For a moment the Hulk stared at the green-glowing figure. Then he turned once more to the old man struggling in his fist, then back to the shimmering Stern, then back to Ross once more.

At last, snarling savagely, his decision made, the Hulk tossed General Ross aside almost casually, then leaped toward the glowing figure before him.

Rudolf Stern’s body stood unmoving. It was now merely a host form to the mind of a creature whose body had been destroyed—a creature that had slain Stern because the old scientist had learned too much, and because the gamma radiation Stern had been subjected to over the years had made him all but immune to Sh’mballah’s mind-controlling powers.

Now Sh’mballah, in the body of Stern, stood before a creature whose own gamma energy far eclipsed Stern’s—almost rivaling Sh’mballah’s own gamma-induced existence.

The Hulk’s claw-like hand reached for the glowing figure, then recoiled in sudden pain. The glow which surrounded Stern had hurt him. “Now you hurt Hulk, too?”

Cautiously, the Hulk retreated for a moment, glancing over at Ross and the others in confusion. They seemed almost a painted tableau. Ross by his radio, Quartermain gazing in wonderment, Rick concerned, and Linda . . . the Hulk couldn’t understand the look in Linda’s eyes.

His anger grew. Stern had hurt him, and no one hurts the Hulk—ever!

He whirled, his massive hands lunging for Stern/Sh’mballah’s throat, but the glow around the aging scientist danced. And it burned.

“No! Nobody hurts Hulk! *Nobody!”*

A growl rumbling deep in his throat, the man-brute renewed his assault, his great arms encircling the glowing figure, his hands digging deep into the smaller man’s back.

There is no way you can destroy my host body, fool. Sh’mballah has lived for thousands of your lifetimes. And when I die, your world dies with me.

“No!” The Hulk’s voice was loud, certain. Nothing could stop him when he set his simple mind to it. Nothing!

The gamma-green glow increased, the heat contorting the Hulk’s face in anguish. This puny human was burning him,

hotter and hotter.

With a howl of unimaginable pain, the Hulk released his vise-like grip, stumbling back into an old elm tree.

Kwrack!

The impact of the half-ton behemoth sheared the old shade tree off at the base. Almost by reflex, the jade-hued giant grabbed the splintered trunk in one huge hand and swung it at Stern/Sh'mballah like a baseball bat.

But before the makeshift bludgeon could strike him, the glow surrounding the shimmering figure flickered for a moment, and a bright green flame seemed to leap toward the onrushing tree, enveloping it.

In an instant, the tree was gone, reduced to drifting ash.

The Hulk stared at the fragile gray flakes sifting between his fingers, dumbfounded. Where was the tree? What had happened to Hulk's weapon?

The man-brute's rage grew greater. Like some wild beast, he snarled at the glowing figure, but this time, wisely, he stayed where he was.

Ross shouted into his radio, "Where're those reinforcements, damn it? Get 'em over here—now! And while you're at it, send along a couple of choppers. We can use everything we can get."

The static at the other end of the transmission cleared, and a gruff voice replied. "The only chopper we got handy is a construction rig, General. One of them jobbies with the winch-hoist, y'know? I don't see how it can help you."

"At this point, I'm willing to accept anything. You just get that rig over here. I'll worry about how to use it."

"Anything you say, General. Need anything else while we're at it?"

Ross didn't have to consider his answer. "Yeah. How about a priest? The way things are going here, he's liable to have plenty of work before the night is over. Ten-four."

“Yeah. Ten-four, General. And good luck.”

Ross turned to Quartermain. “Well, what are you standing around here for, Mister? You’ve got work to do. That goes for you, too, Jones. God help us, but we need every man available.”

Linda piped up. “What do you want *me* to do, General? I’d like to help, too.”

It was more than Ross could stand. “You can damned well stay out of the line of fire, little girl. This street is going to become a battleground in another few seconds, and I don’t need any small-town girl getting her damned fool head blown off.”

Linda fumed, and Rick spoke up. “What would you like me to do, General?”

“What I’d like you to do and what I want you to do are two different things entirely,” Ross snapped. The general headed for his Jeep, Quartermain beside him. Rick followed behind.

“If I understand what that glowing spook said, he’s turned himself into some kind of walking bomb. We’ve got to do something to defuse him, kid, and we’ve got to do it fast.”

“And just how do you figure to do that, General?”

Ross spun toward Rick, seething. “Damn it, Jones, are you as thick as your big green friend? How am I supposed to know how to defuse a human bomb? All I can do is what I’ve always done—namely, blast it from here to eternity. It’s always worked in the past.”

“But the Hulk is standing right next to him,” Rick pleaded. “If you launch enough fire-power to destroy Stern’s body, you’re liable to destroy the Hulk, as well.”

Ross grew quiet as Rick continued. “General, please—there’s a man inside that brutish green body, a good man named Bruce Banner. You can’t do anything that might harm him.”

The general’s face suddenly looked old and tired. “Jones, I don’t want to kill anyone, even a man I’m not particularly fond of. But there’s a much bigger picture to be considered here. It comes down to the life of one man-turned-monster weighed against the lives of hundreds, maybe thousands.

“When it comes right down to it, boy, I don’t have much of a choice. That thing inside Stern’s body has to die, even if Bruce Banner dies, as well.”

From the distance, the fierce beating of helicopter blades could be heard, faint at first, then louder. Ross nearly chewed the end off his cigar as he snatched up his radio. “It’s about time you jokers got here. You suitably armed?” The radio crackled an affirmative reply.

Ross turned and squinted at the Hulk, who had been cautiously stalking around his glowing foe, looking for an opening. Then, apparently finding one, the emerald man-beast lunged forward.

Again, the radiation surrounding Stern’s body crackled with intense ferocity, and once more the Hulk recoiled, his hands fairly smoking.

Linda reached the Hulk’s side as the man-brute rose, staring dumbly at his smoldering palms. “Hulk . . . ?”

The behemoth whirled, glaring at the suddenly frightened girl, a growl rumbling deep in his throat. “Bah! Girl tried to trick Hulk before. What does girl want from Hulk now?”

“I only want to help you, Hulk. Here—give me your hand.”

Confused, the man-brute hesitated for a moment. Then, almost timidly, he held out a massive hand and placed it in Linda’s. The ferocity faded from the Hulk’s blazing eyes, the seemingly perpetual snarl all but faded from his lips. “Why do you want to help Hulk, girl?”

“Because I’m your friend.”

“Hulk’s . . . friend?” His voice was so hopeful, so innocent, that Linda almost flinched at the incongruity of it. But, still,

she was touched.

“If you’ll have me, Hulk, we all want to be your friends.” Linda meant the words as she spoke them.

Behind them, General Ross fumed. “What in heaven’s name is that fool girl doing? That brute could turn on her at any second, break her in half.”

Rick shook his head in disagreement. “No, General, the Hulk isn’t a killer. That’s something you still don’t understand. He’s like a child, a frightened, simple-minded child, who only lashes out against the things that threaten him or frighten him. All he really wants is to find a place where he can live in peace.”

Ross snorted. “Thanks for the analysis, Doctor Jones. I’ll take it under advisement.”

Quartermain grabbed Ross by the shoulder. “General, we’d do well to remember we have a more urgent problem than the Hulk right now. Take a good look at our dear departed friend.” The SHIELD agent thrust his cleft chin toward Stern’s still-glowing body.

“Is it my imagination, or is he glowing even brighter than before?”

Ross lunged for his radio. “Damned fool, letting myself get distracted like some amateur!” The aura of command returned to his voice as the radio crackled. “You, up there in the chopper! I want you to zero in on that green-glowing figure standing in the center of the street here, and open up on it with everything you’ve got! Understood?” He didn’t wait for a reply as he hurried Rick and the others down behind his parked Jeep.

Spak! Spak-ak-ak-ak-ak!

Bullets whizzed toward the glowing Stern, a veritable hail of sizzling lead. They were aimed for his torso, his heart, but they never reached their intended target. When they drew

close enough, they simply melted in the heat of Stern's gamma-radiated glow.

Fools, your primitive weapons cannot harm Sh'mballah's essence.

A second volley rang out, two hundred rounds of lethal ammunition splitting the cool night sky. But again, not a single projectile came within a few feet of its target.

Ross felt his stomach sink, even as his hand closed unconsciously around the butt of the pistol strapped to his hip. "Die, damn you! Why won't you die?"

Almost without thinking, Ross stepped forward, the pistol now level in his hand. The gamma-spawned heat assailed him, sweat ran in rivulets down his determined face, but still he walked on. Perhaps he couldn't stop. Perhaps he didn't want to.

Rick Jones glanced at Linda and saw the terror that gripped the girl. He moved up beside her and put a comforting arm around her shoulder. She shivered at his touch, then relaxed and slid into the nook between his arm and his chest. She needed comfort, protection, and even if Rick couldn't really provide it for her in this situation, he tried.

Clay Quartermain's ruggedly handsome face was creased with worry. Ross was actively committing suicide, and it was too late for the SHIELD agent to do anything to help him. All he could do now was watch. And mourn.

Nearer to the glowing figure now, Ross squeezed the trigger of his automatic. Once. Twice. The bullets melted in mid-air.

Through all this, the Hulk had stood watching, his piggish eyes narrowed, his jaw slack in confusion. Now the man-brute looked at Linda, then at Rick, and saw the fear and worry mirrored in the faces of those who had called

themselves his friends. And suddenly he knew what he must do.

With a single jarring leap, the behemoth stood at Ross's side, the impact of his landing almost knocking the older man off his feet. Then, surprisingly gently, the Hulk grabbed Ross's gun arm. "Let go of me, you great green gargoyle! Somebody has to stop that creature—and I'm the one in charge!"

"Bah! Puny guns cannot hurt glowing man! Guns are not strong enough! Only Hulk is strong enough!

"Hulk is the strongest one there is!"

And, almost casually, he tossed the struggling Ross back into the company of his friends.

Bruised, but otherwise uninjured, Ross scrambled to his feet as the construction copter made another pass at the glowing Stern. The bullets turned to small leaden puddles in the street.

Again, Ross grabbed his radio. "Retreat, you idiots! Can't you see your bullets are useless?"

A voice edged with static replied, "Then what do you want us to do, General?"

"I don't know, damn it—but we can't afford to lose you. Just bring that big bird down for now, and we'll wing the rest."

The chopper descended softly at Ross's command, settling gently on the wide main street, its heavy metal winch-hook barely scraping the asphalt. A somewhat frightened young pilot emerged, followed by the rest of the general's heavily armed troops.

"Out of the way, all of you! I'm going to take that egg-beater up myself!" shouted Ross, elbowing his way through the gaggle of combat-ready G.I.'s.

"But, General—" protested the young pilot.

“Don’t argue with me, Mister. I’ve been flying birds like this since before you were a gleam in your mother’s eye!” And, with that, Ross stepped inside.

The copter rose like a graceful bird, hanging steady in the air for a moment before slipping to the right, then rounding the glowing figure that had once been Rudy Stern. Ross grabbed the radio mike and switched it to loudspeaker.

“He’s starting to move again. Those of you who brought radiation suits, get ’em on—and fast. We’ll have to take that glowing spook hand-to-hand.”

A moment later, three men clad in heavy asbestos, lead-lined suits lumbered down the ruptured streets of Crater Falls toward the glowing Rudy Stern. The walking dead man saw them coming and turned toward them defiantly.

Several more of the general’s troops flanked Stern on either side, carrying oddly shaped rifles which seemed quite out of place in such rustic surroundings. But, then again, so was a great green Goliath and a strangely shimmering old man whose very touch seemed to ignite a seering emerald flame.

The riflemen knelt down in firing position, sweat beading on their brows. For several seconds, Ross circled the stalking Stern, and then—“Now, blast it! Fire! *Fire!!”*

Four specially designed rocket shells screamed across the square, only to explode harmlessly long before they could reach their glowing target. The riflemen scrambled away to safety.

Furiously, the Hulk leaped after the shambling Stern, landing almost beside him with a resounding *thoom.* The impact of his huge emerald feet created shock waves along the street like the rumbling of a minor earthquake. Stern/Sh’mballah stumbled for an instant, then regained his footing and turned to the raging Hulk, a look of disdain crossing his ghastly features.

No need to bother destroying the brutish one now. The glowing figure turned once more, this time to find his path blocked by three clumsily clad forms. Would these primitive creatures never learn?

Deliberately, the alien creature directed his host body toward the three squat figures that dared to block his path. Stern's empty eyes glowed with inhuman power. Pure, unadulterated fear crossed the faces of the three radiation-suited soldiers. They turned to run, but their legs refused to respond.

You will not escape Sh'mballah, fools. It is time you were taught a lesson.

Ross inched the copter closer to Stern's body and felt the incredible heat emanating from the glowing form. Lord, the thing was a walking inferno. It wouldn't be much longer now before it reached critical mass and exploded.

Stern/Sh'mballah shambled toward the three figures held immobile before it. Their blood pulsed within their veins at a fantastic rate, all but boiling as a result of the terrible heat.

Quite deliberately, his withered hand took hold of the foremost of the three men, who screamed at Stern/Sh'mballah's touch.

It was a scream quickly echoed by Linda Connelly as she watched the radiation-suited figure being incinerated by the glowing man's impossible heat. "No! This can't be happening! Please, God—don't let this happen!"

In a second, she was sobbing uncontrollably, and there was nothing Clay Quartermain could say to help, though he tried his best.

In annoyance, Rick Jones pushed Quartermain aside. "I'll take care of Linda, chum. You'd better do something to help your precious general." Quartermain thought he sensed a pang of jealousy in Rick's tone, but he quickly dismissed it. This wasn't the time for personal animosity.

Once more, the furious Hulk assaulted the glowing figure, and once more, he fell back, unable to endure the torturous heat. Still, uneven teeth gritted, he prepared himself to strike again, his simple mind refusing to be turned from its purpose.

As if sensing this, Stern/Sh'mballah turned to face the green Goliath, his ghastly lips curled back in an evil sneer.

I was willing to ignore you, brute—but your persistence has been your undoing.

The glowing creature's hollow eyes danced with emerald fire, and his awesomely powerful mind stabbed deep into the Hulk's own. Somewhere inside there was something that Sh'mballah could control, and the alien despot was determined to find it.

And find it, he did—that almost infinitesimal mote of memory which was the mind of Bruce Banner. That part of the Hulk's subconscious screamed, and Sh'mballah knew he had triumphed.

At Sh'mballah's telepathic command, the Hulk's mighty arms fell stiffly to his side, his fingers going limp as his resistance failed. A moment or more later, and the man-brute was completely unable to move.

For perhaps the first time in his long and tormented life, the Hulk was completely helpless.

Twenty-Nine

Now you belong to Sh’mballah, brute. You are mine to do with as I please.

The walking dead man laughed, a laugh as cold as the grave, and it sent chills racing along the spines of the remaining two men in the radiation suits, who had stood by numbly as the glowing creature incinerated their friend. They knew now they were next, and their fear was overwhelming.

Stern/Sh’mballah glanced at the terrified pair. Now, with the Hulk as his puppet, they meant nothing to him. Soon, nothing would mean anything. For he had invincible power controlled by an unstoppable force.

Raise your arms, Hulk. Do as I command.

At first, the man-brute struggled to resist, his rippling muscles tensing. But, at last, against his will, his powerful arms rose from his sides, as in a gesture of surrender. The green Goliath wanted to roar his anger, but his vocal chords, and all his other muscles, remained paralyzed.

From the circling helicopter, Ross watched with consternation. If the blasted Hulk wasn’t strong enough to defy that glowing gruesomeness, who on earth was? Ross angled the chopper higher, then turned to examine its contents. Aside from the thick steel cable wound around the winch-reel, there didn’t seem to be much; a couple of gum wrappers, a crushed and discarded cigarette pack, evidence of the soldiers this chopper had transported only minutes before—and one thing more—there, in a corner of the cargo hold, left behind by one of the G.I.’s when disembarking, was one of the special shells that had been used during Operation Peapod, a shell containing a special gelatinous substance which would become a shatter-proof bubble on contact with the air.

Was it possible? Perhaps. At least it was a chance. Anything that could contain the Hulk should also be able to contain the glowing Stern, maybe even contain his gamma-radiation and thus prevent the explosion.

Ross put the chopper on a course that would take it directly over the glowing figure, then locked on the auto-pilot and lugged the gel-shell to the hatch in the chopper’s side.

The copter came in low over the glowing figure, and there was a silent prayer on the lips of Thunderbolt Ross as he released the heavy projectile.

The gel-shell struck at Stern/Sh’mballah’s feet, exploding on contact, releasing an overwhelming spray of fast-forming plastic. Within seconds, the walking dead man was completely encased in a bubble of hardened plastic.

Fools, why do you continue? You cannot hope to hold in check power such as mine!

But the distraction had more than served its purpose. Just beyond the plastic dome, the previously immobile Hulk suddenly stirred, shaking his shaggy head in confusion, released from the alien’s control. Then, realizing what had

happened, the man-brute turned toward the imprisoned figure, snarling his rage, his balled fists shaking in fury.

Within the plastic dome, Stern/Sh'mballah watched the emerald man-brute and considered. Should he regain command of the Hulk? No. It appeared this might require all his power, after all, and maintaining control of the massive man-monster expended too much energy.

Against the Hulk, Operation Peapod had been successful, but no one had any idea if it would work against something like Sh'mballah. The special plastic had been designed to withstand the terrible physical battering of the jade-hued giant, but not the awesome amount of heat the glowing Stern seemed to generate.

Ross could only pray the plastic cage would hold Stern, but in his heart of hearts, he really didn't believe it for a minute. Even as he watched, the perimeters of the plastic bubble began to glow red-hot. It was only a matter of moments before Stern/Sh'mballah would be free once more.

The Hulk stood by uncertainly, watching the destruction of a bubble he only dimly remembered. From the copter, Ross saw this.

The Hulk. Now, it looked as if *he* was their only hope of salvation, if he could somehow be maneuvered into helping them. But how? Though the man-brute shared Bruce Banner's body, he shared none of the frail physicist's vast intellect. And no matter how Ross might try to persuade him, there was no way the Hulk would ever deign to help the general, whom he despised with every fiber of his being. No, someone else would have to convince the green Goliath to help them. Maybe Jones?

The bubble was melting faster now, and the awkward figure inside could be seen clearly again, the glow around it building to a brilliant intensity. It wouldn't be long now, Ross realized. He had to move fast.

Ross shouted into the radio, “Put Jones on the line—now!”

Rick grabbed the receiver. “Yeah, General. What’s up?”

“Listen, kid—I’ve got an idea, and you might be the only one who can help me make it work.”

“Whatever I can do, General. You know that. Lay it on me.”

Ross took a deep breath. “Okay, just listen closely. This chopper I’m flying has a heavy-duty winch attached, complete with cable. I’m going to lower that cable down to you, and then I want you to convince that big green buddy of yours to grab hold of Stern and hitch a ride.

“The only hope we have is to get Stern’s body far enough away from this town, out into the woods, before it explodes.”

“But if the Hulk is still holding Stern’s body when it blows,” Rick gasped, “it’ll destroy him, too. General, you can’t do that.”

“Damn it, Jones, we’ve already had this argument once tonight. It’s the Hulk’s life weighed against the lives of everyone else in this town. You’ve got to be realistic, Rick.” Ross’s voice softened now. He, too, knew what it was like to lose someone close to you. “We don’t have any choice.”

Rick’s jaw quivered. A thousand different thoughts cascaded through his mind. He couldn’t condemn his best friend to certain death, and yet, if he didn’t, a thousand other lives would be lost, instead. God help him, he didn’t know what to do.

Tears rolled from his tired eyes as he finally made his decision. “Forgive me, General, but Bruce Banner saved my life once. I just can’t send him to his death now. I just can’t.”

Ross was furious. “Damn it, Jones—grow up. Don’t you think Banner would want you to—”

A soft, timid voice interrupted Ross’s tirade. “I . . . I don’t really know Bruce Banner,” Linda said. “I admit that. But

I’ve seen the Hulk, and I was wondering—isn’t there a chance the Hulk can survive the explosion, Rick? Even the slightest chance?”

Rick stared at Linda in astonishment as she continued. “Please, Rick, this town is my home. My friends live here, everyone I know. I don’t want them to die. The Hulk is strong, impossibly strong. If anyone can survive the explosion, he can.

“But maybe it won’t even come to that. Maybe the Hulk can just let go of Stern’s body once they get far enough away from Crater Falls. That’s possible, isn’t it, General?”

Ross’s voice crackled as he replied. “We can try, Miss. I can’t promise anything, but we can sure as hell try.”

Rick pulled himself together, his voice still trembling. “You’d better try, General. You’d better try. C’mon, let’s get this over with.”

Rick Jones stood at the Hulk’s side, the two of them watching as the plastic bubble surrounding Stern/Sh’mballah sizzled asunder. They could feel the glowing figure’s heat as an almost-physical thing.

“Please, Hulk, you’ve got to help us. You’re our only hope.”

The man-brute turned to Rick, his emerald brow knitted in annoyance. “Bah! Why should Hulk help puny humans? Puny humans always hound Hulk, try to hurt Hulk. Hulk does not want to help you. Hulk just wants to be left alone.”

In desperation, Rick grabbed the green Goliath’s brawny arm. “You have to help us, Hulk. If you refuse, hundreds of people will die—people who have never lifted a finger against you, people who could have been your friends. Please, Hulk, we need you. And I think somewhere deep inside of you, you need us.”

“Bah! Hulk needs only Hulk. Hulk does not need puny humans, even those who would be Hulk’s . . .” Suddenly, the word dawned on him. “. . . friends?” It wasn’t really a question; it was a hope.

“Yes, Hulk—friends. Once they see you’re willing to help them, everyone will be on your side. You won’t have to run anymore. You won’t have to hide.” The lie was choking in Rick’s throat. He knew full well the confusion he was stirring in the man-brute’s simple mind.

“Please, Hulk, show the people you want to be their friend. Do it for me. Do it for Linda.”

The Hulk turned toward the girl standing hopefully beside Clay Quartermain. His dark eyes softened. “For you, boy. For Linda. For all Hulk’s friends, Hulk will do as you say.”

It had worked. Rick had accomplished the task demanded of him. But he wasn’t exactly proud. “Do you see that helicopter, Hulk?”

“That metal bird?”

“Yeah, that’s it, Hulk. Do you see that cable dangling from its underside?” The man-brute nodded. “What you have to do, Hulk, is grab that glowing man who has hurt you, then grab that cable, and let the big metal bird carry you both away from the heart of town, where you will drop the glowing man. Do you understand, Hulk?”

The jade giant snarled. “You want to hurt Hulk. Glowing man is hot. Glowing man burns Hulk.”

Rick grimaced. The plastic bubble had almost completely dissolved now. At any moment, Stern/Sh’mballah would emerge, and then it would all be over—unless he could get the Hulk to cooperate.

“We know the glowing man is hot, Hulk, and we’re sorry he may hurt you. But he’ll hurt all your new friends a whole lot more if you don’t do as I’ve asked.”

“Glowing man will hurt Hulk’s friends?” Suddenly, the green Goliath was furious. He turned toward the swiftly melting bubble, roaring his rage. Silently, Rick stepped away, retreating to the company of Linda and Quartermain. The heat was growing far too intense for him to stay.

The plastic bubble was now merely a steaming ring of bubbling black residue. His makeshift prison disposed of, Stern/Sh’mballah strode forward, his ghastly face an angry mask.

It’s far too late to stop me now. Within minutes, I shall explode and take this entire village with me.

“No!” roared the Hulk. His face twisted in pain, he grabbed the glowing figure once more, but this time he would not let go. This time he would hang on as long as he had to. After all, he had friends now, and he could not let them down.

Like emerald tree trunks, the man-brute wrapped his arms around Stern’s slender body. Radioactive flame danced around the Hulk’s body, searing him to his soul. Tears welled up in his deepset eyes, but still he would not give in. He couldn’t.

For as long as he could remember, everyone had always hated the Hulk, but here was his chance to put an end to that forever, a chance he dare not let slip away.

High above the Hulk, Ross circled. The man-brute’s overwhelming agony was quite obvious now, and the general winced visibly in unexpected sympathy, then hit the winch control and sent the thick steel cable humming down, until it was well within the jade giant’s reach. The cable gently whapped the man-brute across the side of his head, and remembering Rick’s orders, he quickly took hold, maintaining his grip on Stern’s glowing body with his other hand. As soon as the general was certain the Hulk’s grip was secure, he threw the winch into reverse and drew his bizarre passengers upward.

The copter bucked for a second under the sudden, unexpected weight, but Ross quickly compensated for the drag and regained control. The general could feel the heat from below now, and it was not difficult to imagine the torment the Hulk must be enduring. Stern was growing brighter with every passing second; his body was completely enveloped by emerald flames. It wouldn’t be too much longer.

Ross could only pray it wouldn’t be too soon.

It would take approximately five minutes for the chopper to reach the distant lake which fed water to the falls. The general prayed he would still be among the living when he got there . . . *if* he got there.

The copter arced away from the town square, carrying a bizarre bundle below it.

And none of those watching the incredible operation from below had any idea whatever if they would ever see the Hulk or Thunderbolt Ross again.

Rick Jones bowed his head and, softly, began to cry. At this point, there was nothing else for him to do.

Thirty

Stern/Sh’mballah squirmed in the man-brute’s grasp, his expression one of growing concern. Even though the skin of the Hulk’s massive hand had begun to blister from the heat, he refused to release his grip on his glowing captive.

Release me, brute. RELEASE ME!

“Never! Glowing man tried to hurt Hulk’s friends! Now, shut up, glowing man! Stop talking inside Hulk’s head—or Hulk will smash!” The man-monster was enraged beyond measure, his snarled words merely guttural sounds, hardly comprehensible.

Being a telepath, however, Sh’mballah understood the Hulk’s threats, and he knew the man-brute meant what he said.

He had only one possible avenue of escape now.

He had to switch host forms—from the old man into the Hulk. With his matchless mind in the man-brute’s supremely powerful body, Sh’mballah would be unstoppable.

Stern’s brow knitted in concentration, and the Hulk growled as jagged daggers of pure thought stabbed into his

brain.

“What are you doing to Hulk, glowing man? What?”

Stern/Sh’mballah was silent; he could not spare the energy to speak. He had to force his consciousness into the man-brute’s body, displacing the feeble mind that was the green Goliath’s own.

“Hulk’s head hurts. Stop it, glowing man! Stop it!” The Hulk’s massive hand tightened on Stern’s frail frame as he shouted his rage. The alien entity controlling Stern winced in pain and fought back.

“Stop it, glowing man! Stop—or Hulk will smash!”

His powerful fingers dug deep into Stern’s withered flesh. His meager mind began to whirl. In a miasma of images, the Hulk saw General Ross before him, saw Gamma Base, saw the many and varied prisons which had unsuccessfully tried to contain him, prisons he had crushed in mindless fury.

He saw the youth called Rick Jones, perhaps the Hulk’s only true friend. And now he saw another form, a slender, bespectacled figure clad in a clean white lab coat. He saw the face and figure of Bruce Banner, and there was nothing the Hulk wanted to see less.

Bruce Banner was the Hulk’s worst enemy, the man the green Goliath hated most in all the world, because the coming of Bruce Banner meant the end of the Hulk, meant the jade-jawed giant would suddenly cease to be. And that was not right, was not fair.

The Hulk was the most powerful man-like creature on earth. Bruce Banner was puny, frail. The Hulk was raw, unbridled emotion. Emotion was something Bruce Banner actively disdained. But the Hulk was Bruce Banner, though he would die before he would admit it.

The Hulk howled in pain and shook his head violently. Still the alien consciousness strained to gain control of the Hulk. Stern’s body pulsed with effort, his eyes were solid pools of

green, his mouth breathed emerald flame, and jade smoke poured from his ears and nostrils. Sh'mballah tried to possess the Hulk. And he failed. The man-brute's anger created a barrier the alien's telepathic powers could not penetrate.

Reluctantly, Sh'mballah acknowledged his failure. He could not possess the body of the Hulk . . .

But General Ross was another matter entirely.

Through binoculars borrowed from Clay Quartermain, Rick Jones anxiously watched the helicopter fade into the distance. He saw the Hulk twisting violently beneath the big whirlybird, watched as the man-brute almost shook the copter down, then saw Stern's glowing body suddenly go limp in the Hulk's mighty hands. The copter flew on, becoming little more than a pinpoint in the distance, and then, in a blinding flash of emerald light, the chopper was gone.

What had happened? Rick knew, but he refused to admit it.

"Quick, Quartermain, get the general on the radio. I think something's happened out there."

"I didn't know *you* were my boss, too, kid," Clay started to say, then paused as the rumbling sound of the explosion finally reached them.

"General? General Ross?" Clay shouted into the radio mike. There was no answer, but by now Quartermain hadn't really expected one. There was only the sound of static filling the cold night air.

Linda grabbed Rick, clinging to him tightly. "What's going on, Rick? Please, you've got to tell me."

Rick wanted to hold Linda, press her close to him. He wanted to smother her body with his. But the static crackling from the radio snapped him back to reality.

“God only knows, Linda.”

Stern’s body had gone limp, yet an inhuman voice echoed from somewhere deep within it.

Perhaps Sh’mballah does not have to die, after all. Perhaps there is still a way for me to conquer this backward world.

Stern’s ghastly head lifted to peer at the aircraft above him, and the emerald fire burned brighter in his eyes. At the copter’s controls, Ross suddenly began to feel an uncomfortable tingling, and he heard a buzzing in his head. In an instant, he realized what was happening, and fear knotted in his throat. He reached for the winch controls, prepared to jettison his cargo now, even though he was more than a mile from his target—but his fingers refused to respond.

Ross called out, horrified at his sudden helplessness. “Do something, Hulk! He’s trying to control *me* now! In God’s name, you mindless monster— *Do something!!”*

The Hulk lifted his shaggy head toward the copter’s underside and snarled. He had always hated Ross more than any other person, except Banner, of course. Now Ross was yelling at him again, calling Hulk names. Ross would pay for this. Ross would pay.

In his fury, the man-brute shook the limp, glowing figure in his fist like a broken doll. Above, in the copter, the emerald glow which had begun to grow in the general’s eyes abruptly faded once more. Involuntarily, the Hulk had done as Ross had bade him, freeing the general from Sh’mballah’s spell.

Stern’s body was glowing brighter than ever now. The moment of critical mass was almost at hand. Thankfully, Ross saw the copter was over the lake. He reached for the winch control, and he pressed it.

Knowing full well he might be condemning the Hulk to death, knowing the man-brute had saved his mind and life mere moments before, Ross pressed the button.

And nothing happened.

Fearfully, Ross glanced at the winch, and he saw that the Hulk's violent struggling had snarled the cable beyond all hope of repair.

"Damn it! What am I supposed to do now?" The general's eyes circled the copter's interior in an instant. Propped in a corner, he saw salvation.

Below him, on the cable, the furious Hulk still clutched a glowing figure.

Ross pulled back on the throttle, aimed the chopper at the stars, and set the auto-pilot. He prayed this would give him enough altitude. Then he snapped on the waiting parachute and jumped. There wasn't time to do anything else. As he plunged past the ranting Hulk, he wanted to wish the man-brute luck, but the words simply would not come. The only sound was the rush of the wind whistling by him, and the gentle lap of the water far below.

The wind whipped at his eyes as he pulled the ripcord, forcing the tears which otherwise would not come.

And then sound became everything. Sound and blinding green light. Then darkness. And dampness.

And nothingness.

Thirty-One

Gamma Base was humming with activity. The Hulk-buster weaponry was all being dismantled. No more need for it now that the Hulk himself was dead, destroyed in the devastating explosion of Rudolf Stern’s gamma-irradiated body.

From the window of his hospital room, Thunderbolt Ross supervised the dismantling procedures. “Quartermain, tell them to put the ion displacers in stasistorage. They’re too dangerous to be left unguarded. Come on, Quartermain—hop to it, man. We haven’t got all day to waste.”

Quartermain smiled and strolled out of the room. The general was becoming more and more his old self with every passing day.

The room was almost quiet now, Ross saying nothing, merely fuming under his breath. Rick Jones sat gazing out the window, watching all the little bits and pieces of machinery as they were crated and carried away.

“I still can’t believe he’s really gone, General.”

“Truth to tell, Jones, neither can I. I didn’t like Banner much, downright hated the Hulk. But, still, it doesn’t make me happy to see anyone die, not even him—especially when he died as some sort of hero.”

“Yeah. A hero.” The thought almost brought a smile to Rick’s lips. “I think he would have liked that. But the whole thing still makes me feel one helluva lot older, General.”

Ross touched the thick bandages that covered more than half his body. The radiation burns were healing quickly, but they still itched unbearably. “You feel older, Jones? Then what does that make me? Listen, kid, I’m going to let you in on a little secret. Death is part of life. You learn to accept it after a while. You never learn to like it, but you accept it, because it’s there. Death and taxes, Jones. They’re the only two real constants in this world.”

Rick was quiet—no answer, no snappy comeback. Ross coughed uncomfortably, then changed the subject. “So, what are you planning to do now, kid? We can’t let you hang around Gamma Base much longer without proper clearance and authorization. What you tell the world about what happened back at Crater Falls is up to you. But you know how Uncle Sam feels about it.”

Rick smiled wanly. “Don’t sweat it, General. I won’t give you any bad press. I’m as anxious to forget what happened there as the rest of you, even though I’m going back. Linda asked if I’d visit her now that it’s over, maybe help her pick up a few of the pieces of her life. After that, who knows? That’s what *I’m* doing, General. And you?”

Ross flexed a bandaged muscle and flinched. “Me? I’ll do as I’ve always done—follow orders. I’m a soldier, remember? The medics tell me these blasted bandages can come off in a few weeks. In the meantime, I’ll do my best to put this base back in some kind of order, maybe give it a constructive purpose now that there isn’t a Hulk to track down anymore.

“Don’t you worry about me, kid. I can take care of myself.”

Rick smiled. “Never doubted it for a second, General. But if you’d jumped from that copter a few seconds later—” Rick let the unfinished sentence hang heavy in the air.

Rising from the stiff-backed hospital chair, Rick threw a carefully packed knapsack over his shoulder, then made sure his guitar was securely fastened. Then he turned and headed for the door. “Well, I guess that about does it, General. You hang in there, hear?”

Rick stepped through the doorway and was about to close the door behind him when Ross spoke again.

“Hey, when you finally decide on your future, son, do me a favor and call me, huh?”

Rick grinned. “General, it’ll be my pleasure.”

A government Jeep carried Rick across Gamma Base toward the exit in the distance. Far off to one side, almost on the horizon, he saw a small trench cut into the desert’s face. The wire fences which had been used to cordon off the area had long since fallen into decay. Near the trench, the twisted remains of an old red jalopy could still be seen.

“Hey, you okay?” the driver asked. “You looked pretty pale there for a second, kid.”

“It’s nothing, pal,” Rick replied softly. “Nothing that can’t be cured by time.”

The Jeep accelerated and headed for the gate.

On a hill overlooking the para-military installation, a slender, brown-haired figure sat staring at the work forces far below. He watched as a lone Jeep passed through the exit and growled off into the distance. The gate wasn’t really all that far away, a few minutes’ walk, that was all. He could stroll casually up to the fence, tell the waiting guard his name,

and the welcome he’d receive would be . . . well, unforgettable, to say the least.

But he hadn’t pulled himself, battered and shaking, from the churning waters of Crater Falls Lake simply to offer himself up as a prisoner once more. No, he’d had more than enough of that.

Several miles in the opposite direction, there was a small town where he could catch a bus making connections to all points east and west.

Silently, Bruce Banner rose and started walking toward that town, but his step was not a light one.